

The background of the cover features a large, ornate hall with high ceilings, stained-glass windows, and wooden doors. Several characters are visible: a man in a white lab coat carrying a tray, a woman in a white dress, a young girl with blonde hair in a white uniform, and a pink-haired girl in the foreground with her arms outstretched. A man in a dark blue military-style uniform with a chain belt stands prominently in the center.

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NOVEL
11

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

Table of Contents

[Color Inserts](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Coping with the Greyrat Sisters](#)

[Chapter 2: The Live-In Maid and the Boarding School Student](#)

[Interlude: Master/Servant Relations](#)

[Chapter 3: The Boss and His Flunkies](#)

[Chapter 4: A Brother's Feelings](#)

[Chapter 5: Norn Greyrat](#)

[Chapter 6: Life with the Greyrat Sisters](#)

[Chapter 7: The Third Turning Point](#)

[Chapter 8: Farewells](#)

[Chapter 9: To Begaritt](#)

[Chapter 10: Natural Predator](#)

[Chapter 11: The Desert Ecosystem](#)

[Chapter 12: Traversing the Sands](#)

[Chapter 13: Bazaar](#)

[Chapter 14: The Warriors of the Desert](#)

[Extra Chapter: Norn and the Millis Church](#)

[About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote](#)

[Newsletter](#)

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MUSHOKU TENSEI ~ISEKAI ITTARA HONKI DASU~ VOL. 11

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Illustrations by Shirotaka

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PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen, Stephanie Cohen

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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-222-6

Printed in Canada

First Printing: June 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

VOLUME 11: ADOLESCENCE – GREYRAT SISTERS ARC

Contents

- CHAPTER 1:** Coping with the Greyrat Sisters
- CHAPTER 2:** The Live-In Maid and the Boarding School Student
- INTERLUDE:** Master/Servant Relations
- CHAPTER 3:** The Boss and His Flunkies
- CHAPTER 4:** A Brother's Feelings
- CHAPTER 5:** Norn Greyrat
- CHAPTER 6:** Life with the Greyrat Sisters
- CHAPTER 7:** The Third Turning Point
- CHAPTER 8:** Farewells
- CHAPTER 9:** To Begaritt
- CHAPTER 10:** Natural Predator
- CHAPTER 11:** The Desert Ecosystem
- CHAPTER 12:** Traversing the Sands
- CHAPTER 13:** Bazaar
- CHAPTER 14:** The Warriors of the Desert
- EXTRA CHAPTER:** Norn and the Millis Church

*"There's no one more similar to us than
our siblings. But there's also no one harder
to understand."*

—My ideal family would be one
I could actually make sense of.

*AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
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Chapter 1: Coping with the Greyrat Sisters

AFTER A LONG, grueling journey, my sisters Norn and Aisha had finally made it to my house in the city of Sharia. At the moment, they were sitting at the dining table, eating something I'd quickly tossed together.

"Any good?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah!" called Aisha. "It's great!"

Norn stayed silent. She wasn't eating as enthusiastically as her sister, but she hadn't grimaced or complained, either. I was no match for Sylphie in the kitchen, but I'd at *least* managed to make something edible.

Speaking of Sylphie—she'd left for work a little earlier. She'd wanted to stick around, but her responsibilities to Princess Ariel had to come first. I'd chosen to take the day off from school so I could talk things over with my sisters.

Once they finished their meal, the three of us moved into the living room. Aisha and Norn sat next to each other on the couch, and I took the chair across from them. After serving them tea and letting them relax for a while, I finally decided to broach the main subject.

"Well, I guess I should have said this earlier, but...it's good to see you two. I'm really glad you made it here safely."

"Thank you, elder brother," said Aisha with a demure smile. "It's a pleasure to be here."

My younger sister was wearing a maid uniform, as usual. Her outfit had been a bit too big for her last time we met, but it fit perfectly now. In fact, judging from the small

patches I saw here and there, it was probably the exact same outfit as before.

She seemed to be curious about my house. I'd noticed her neat brown ponytail swaying back and forth as she shot glances around the living room.

“...”

Norn, on the other hand, was staring quietly at the floor in the manner of a much younger child. She wore a cute blue dress adorned with a few frilly touches—pretty typical garb for children in Millishion but bound to stick out around here. Her golden hair looked a bit longer than Aisha's, but it was hard to tell, since she had it pinned up behind her head with a big fashionable clip.

“It sounds like you really pulled your weight on the trip up here, Aisha. I'm impressed.”

“Naturally. I was very motivated to see you again as quickly as I could, brother dear.” Aisha still wore that calm smile, but something about the way she talked struck me as a little odd.

“Uh... Look, this is going to be your home starting today. You can relax a little if you want. Be a bit more casual, maybe?”

“Thank you very much,” Aisha replied. “I appreciate that. But even if we are family, this is still *your* house. It wouldn't be right for me to impose on you without offering anything in return. I was hoping I could provide some help with the household chores, at least.”

Yeah, it felt like she was being really...distant. Or maybe just formal. It was actually making me uncomfortable.

“Incidentally, my dear sister...”

“Yes, brother dearest?”

“Could you maybe stop talking like that? Please?”

“Oh, but I couldn’t possibly. You always speak so politely to me! How could I fail to do the same?”

Ah, so this was my fault. I did tend to be a bit formal in my speech—apparently, it had made Aisha feel like she had to do the same.

“Okay, well, I’ll be more casual with you from now on.”

“By all means,” said Aisha with a smile. “We are siblings, after all. I’m going to continue to address you politely, though, since you’re the head of this household.”

Oh, come on. Just follow my lead, won’t you?

Well, whatever. It wasn’t a bad idea for her to practice speaking formally; choosing the right tone for a given situation was a valuable social skill, after all. Still, it sounded like Aisha had interpreted my politeness to mean I wanted to keep her at arm’s length. Did everyone I’d met over the last few years feel the same way? I sort of defaulted to formal speech in all my interactions, since it felt more respectful...but maybe I ought to try out some casual banter next time I ran into an old acquaintance.

“Hey, Ruijerd, how’s it hanging? You’ve really changed, man! Did ya put on some weight or what? That beard’s new too! What? You’re not Ruijerd? Damn, changed your name too? Well, good to see you’re still a grumpy jerk, at least.”

...On second thought, maybe not. It’s only natural to speak politely with someone you respect, right? Just imagining trying to banter with Ruijerd or Roxy made me want to punch myself in the face.

“Well, anyway... it’s good to have you both here. It might take a while for us to get used to living in the same house, but we’ll figure it out.”

“Of course!” said Aisha energetically.

Her enthusiasm was palpable. It reminded me of the way Pursena got when you dangled a slab of meat in front of her. I felt like Aisha would do anything I asked her to right now.

Norn, on the other hand, still wasn't saying anything, and the expression on her face looked kind of gloomy. I got the feeling she hadn't come to stay with me willingly. The way we'd been reunited probably hadn't helped matters either. From her perspective, I'd wandered home drunk with a strange woman on my arm.

For the moment, it seemed best to take things slow and treat her with care.

"Anyway, I had no idea you'd gotten married to Sylphie!" said Aisha. "When did that happen, anyway? You must have been surprised too, right, Norn?"

Norn shook her head slightly at this attempt to draw her into the conversation. "I don't...really remember Miss Sylphie that well."

That was a little disappointing, but it made sense. Aisha had studied basic etiquette with Sylphie back in Buena Village, while Norn hadn't spent that much time with her.

"So what's the story, brother dear?" asked Aisha, leaning forward eagerly. "What happened to that Eris girl you were with before?"

I wasn't eager to revisit that topic, but...it made sense they were curious about it. "Well, you see..."

Smiling awkwardly, I took a few minutes to fill my sisters in on the recent developments in my life. I started off with my return to the Fittoa Region, where I split up with Eris and became an adventurer. I mentioned that I'd contracted a disease and headed to the University of Magic in hopes of

finding a cure. And then I explained that I'd met Sylphie here, and she'd managed to cure my illness.

Of course, I didn't specify that the illness was erectile dysfunction, or the means by which Sylphie had cured it. That's not the sort of thing you talk about with a pair of ten-year-old girls. I *did* make sure to mention Sylphie was in a slightly tricky situation that required her to dress as a man in public. Princess Ariel had already given me permission to explain this to anyone who I thought needed to know.

To be honest, it might have been smarter not to tell my little sisters about this. They were still just children, after all. But if they were going to be living with us from now on, they'd inevitably figure out the truth at some point, or at least start to harbor some suspicions. Considering the trouble that could cause down the road, I opted to give them a basic outline of the situation up front.

"...And that brings us up to the present, I guess."

After five minutes or so, I'd covered all of the most important events.

Norn was still staring at the floor with a troubled look on her face, but Aisha was studying me with concern. "So is your disease gone now, then?" she asked. "For good?"

"Yeah, I'm fully cured. Nothing to worry about. I'm still doing a rehab session every few days, though."

"Hmm, okay," Aisha murmured thoughtfully, before clapping her hands together. "Oh, I almost forgot!"

"What is it?"

"I've got something for you from Dad. He told me to hand it over right away once I found you."

Popping up off the couch, she dashed up the second floor. Before long, she was trotting back down the stairs with a rectangular box in her hands.

“Here you go!”

For some reason, the thing was secured with three large locks. It never hurt to take extra precautions, of course, but this just felt like broadcasting to the whole world that there was something valuable inside. Then again, maybe the locks were just there to keep Aisha and Norn from poking at the contents and possibly losing them.

I used a touch of magic to snap all three locks open simultaneously.

“Oh! Uhm, I’ve got the keys here, if you want...”

“Hm? Ah, thanks.”

Aisha had frozen in surprise with a ring of keys in her hand. I took them from her and dropped them in my pocket—not that I needed them. Now, time to open the mystery box.

“Uh, wow...”

Well, this was a stash, all right. There was a *significant* amount of money inside, including a dozen or so king’s dollars, and a small horde of various precious metals. It was hard to appraise their exact value at a glance, but they’d fetch a pretty penny if I sold them all.

This had to be the financial support Paul had mentioned in his letter. If I used it wisely, this would be enough to keep my family afloat for a decade or so. I’d have to make sure I didn’t spend it carelessly.

There were also two sheets of paper attached to the inside of the box’s lid. I pulled them off and took a look.

The first was the same letter from Paul that had already reached me a few days earlier. But the second was a message from Lilia. It went into some detail about the current state of Aisha and Norn’s education and elaborated on what she saw as their “flaws.”

In Lilia's opinion, Aisha was a talented child who rarely failed at anything she tried, but this had left her with a swollen head. I was advised to be strict with her. Norn was an ordinary little girl, but constantly being compared to her sister at school had left her sullen and withdrawn, putting up a tough front for all to see. I was asked to treat her gently and with kindness.

It felt like Lilia was being kind of harsh on her daughter for some reason. She still seemed to view herself as Paul's mistress or lover, rather than his second wife. Maybe that had something to do with it? Honestly, my gut instinct was to treat my little sisters as equally as possible.

Still...according to this letter, Aisha really was a remarkably talented kid. As of a year ago, Lilia had basically run out of things to teach her. She had a good grasp on reading, writing, math, history, and geography. What was more, she was skilled at cleaning, laundry, general housework, and cooking. She'd even reached the Beginner tier in the Water God Style—and with all six of the basic elements of magic too.

While she'd been enrolled in a school at Millishion, Roxy and the others had shown up soon afterward, so Aisha had spent barely any time inside a classroom of late. And even so, she'd gotten this far. It was no wonder Norn had a bit of an inferiority complex.

Norn was basically an ordinary kid. She had no notable strengths or weaknesses, academically, which put her well ahead of where Eris was at her age, at least. In most classes, she landed right in the middle of the pack, or just a bit below it. Her life had been seriously disrupted by all this travel, though. Given the circumstances, you could say she was actually doing pretty well. She definitely hadn't given up on improving, at least.

There weren't any other messages in the box. I'd been hoping for a few words from Roxy, honestly, but these were intimate family letters, so she'd probably refrained out of politeness.

"Okay then," I said, setting down the letters. "Once you're both settled in, I guess our next step will be to get you back in school."

"What?! No!"

For some reason, it was Aisha who immediately piped up to object. I was a little surprised by that. Maybe her last experience in the educational system hadn't been too pleasant.

"I don't have anything left to learn in school, Rudeus! I worked really hard so I could be a good maid for you!"

"Okay, but—"

"I wanna be your maaaaid! You promised, remember?! Look, I've still got that thing you gave me!"

Undoing her ponytail, Aisha showed me what she'd used to keep it in place. It was part of the forehead protector I'd given her back in the day. She'd altered the protective metal plate to turn it into a hair ornament.

I had to admit it made me happy to see that she'd been holding on to that thing all these years. But that had nothing to do with the topic at hand. Honestly, I was okay with her not attending school if she didn't want to. Your desire to learn new things is more important than whether you're sitting in a classroom all day. And if you lack that desire, attending school is just a waste of time. I sure hadn't gotten anything out of my time in junior high school.

That said, Paul's letter had clearly instructed me to get both of my sisters enrolled in school. The concept of

mandatory education wasn't really a thing in this world, but even so...

"Okay, well... I want you to take the entrance exam for the University of Magic, at least. I'll make up my mind based on the results."

"Huh? Ooh, I get it. Okay! No problem!"

Aisha's smile was full of confidence. She seemed convinced she could score top marks on any test I threw at her. Of course, if she *could* manage that, then it was probably fine for her to stop attending school. And I'd be able to justify my decision to our father.

"Norn, why don't you take the test too, while we're at it?"

Norn's eyes flicked toward me when I spoke, but she didn't move her head. This was starting to get to me. Was the kid going to give me the silent treatment for the rest of my life or what?

"I think I might fail it, though," she finally murmured after a long pause.

It felt like the first time she'd actually spoken to me. Which wasn't true at all, of course, but I still felt kind of relieved. It kinda hurt to be ignored, you know?

"Don't worry too much about that, Norn. Anyone can get into this school if they have enough money," I said.

"What...? I don't want you to *buy* me a spot!"

Whoops. Guess I made it sound like I was going to sneak her in through the back door.

"Hey, Norn! You shouldn't talk to Rudeus like that!" hissed Aisha.

"You heard what he said, didn't you? He said he's going to bribe someone to let me in!"

"Well, maybe if you could take a test to save your life, he wouldn't need to!"

"Are you calling me stupid?!" shouted Norn, grabbing her sister by the hair.

Aisha grabbed Norn's wrist right back and took a swipe at her face. In the blink of an eye, they were pulling and scratching at each other furiously, but not too effectively.

In a way, it was almost nice to see such a *normal* fight between two children. Better than one of them punching the other in the jaw, then straddling them for a brutal pummeling. That said, though a little scrap wasn't the worst thing in the world, this one was my fault. I needed to intervene.

"Cut it out, you two." The words came out sharper than I'd expected. The two of them jerked in surprise and instantly stopped moving their hands.

"..."

Norn looked down at the floor again, her expression even more sullen than before. I could see tears gathering in her eyes.

We had a bit of a problem here, clearly. She was even more sensitive about this topic than I'd expected.

"Let me explain, Norn. The university in this city lets everybody attend, regardless of their age, race, or talents... as long as they can pay the fees. I didn't mean that I was going to pay someone off to let you in."

Sniffling softly, Norn wiped the tears from her eyes but didn't reply.

"You remember my tutor Roxy, right? She went here too. It's a good school, with lots of nice professors who can teach you all sorts of things. You might just find something you're...interested in there."

I'd started to say that she might find something she was better at than her sister, but thought better of it mid-sentence. This definitely wasn't a good time to be comparing them.

Norn kept staring at the floor for a while, but eventually she spoke. "Okay. I'll take the dumb test."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she pushed her chair back loudly and walked out of the living room.

"Norn!" Aisha shouted at her back. "We're not done talking yet!"

"Oh, shut up!"

Norn stomped her way up the stairs. A few seconds later, a door slammed shut up on the second floor.

This was...going to be tricky, all right. The girl was clearly at a tough age, and she had a prickly personality. I wasn't sure how well I was equipped to deal with her.

"Honestly, Norn never changes," said Aisha, shrugging her shoulders. "It's such a *hassle*, having to indulge sulky children. Don't you agree, Rudeus?"

We had some issues on this front too, though. This kind of attitude wasn't going to help matters at all.

"Aisha..."

"Yes?"

"I don't want you insulting Norn like that. Especially not about her performance in school."

"Whaaat?" Aisha said, pouting. "But she's barely even trying, Rudeus."

"It might look that way to you, sure. But I think she's doing her best, in her own way."

“...Well, if you say so. I’ll try to keep my opinions to myself.”

That was nice to hear, but she didn’t sound especially willing. Anything I said probably wouldn’t be too convincing, right now. I didn’t know either of them very well, and I didn’t have the faintest clue how to deal with ten-year-old girls, either.

This was going to be a rocky road.

Early that afternoon, I left my two sisters at the house and made a trip to the University of Magic. I made a beeline for the faculty offices, tracked down Vice Principal Jenius, and quickly explained the situation.

“They were both attending other schools previously, yes? I think they should be able to keep up with the introductory courses, then. It would be best for them to take the exam at their earliest convenience.”

After a little discussion, we settled on one week from today for the date of their test. They wouldn’t have much time to study, but that wasn’t really an issue.

“I must say, I’m rather excited to meet them,” Jenius said. “If they’re your sisters, they must be quite talented.”

“One of them is a bit of a prodigy, but the other’s just an ordinary girl.”

“I do hope you’re not just being modest again. Why, I half-expect them to both be capable of silent spellcasting.”

“No, no, nothing of the sort...”

As we engaged in this polite back-and-forth, an unrelated thought popped into my mind.

“By the way, Vice Principal Jenius, do you happen to know if Badigadi is on campus today?”

“...Sir Badigadi? I don’t believe I’ve seen him today, no.”

“Ah. All right, then.”

For such a big, loud guy, Badi could be real elusive when he wanted to. But when he did decide to make an appearance, he was impossible to miss.

“If you have some business with him, I could pass along a message...”

“Nah, it’s nothing urgent. I’m just hoping to sit down and have a talk with him about a mutual acquaintance of ours. I think there might be a misunderstanding I could clear up.”

“Understood. Should I happen to see him, I’ll certainly let him know.”

I thanked the vice principal politely for his help, then went on my way.

I’d meant to head straight home afterward, but had some spare time, so I dropped in on Nanahoshi instead. I knocked at her door and stepped inside, but I found her research room empty. That was unusual at this hour. The girl was basically a shut-in, after all.

I took a peek in her dedicated experiment room, but she wasn’t in there either. I’d been strictly forbidden from entering her bedroom, but I knocked on the door just in case.

“Hmm? Guhhh...”

A long, miserable groan emerged from inside. It sounded like she was in distress.

I hesitated, wondering if I should try to enter. But after a little while, Nanahoshi opened the door herself. Her face was alarmingly pallid.

"Uh, hey. Are you all right?"

"My...my head is killing me... I think...I'm gonna be sick..."

Gah. She stinks of booze.

Come to think of it, it was no surprise she was hungover. She'd really gone for broke last night. If anything, she was lucky she hadn't given herself alcohol poisoning.

"Come sit down for a second, Nanahoshi. I'll fix you up."

I dragged my stumbling friend into her experiment room, seated her in a chair, and then took her head between my hands. After leading off with a basic detoxification spell, I added a little healing magic to help with the pain.

"Phew... Thanks, Rudeus. I owe you one."

Shaking her head slowly, Nanahoshi pressed her fingers to her temples. After a moment, she turned and put on the mask she'd left lying on her table.

I was speaking to Silent Sevenstar now, apparently.

"Anyway, is there something you need from me? If it's about your reward, it's not ready yet. I'd appreciate a little patience."

Her words were as cool as ever, but there was a hint of embarrassment in her voice. Could she be one of those "kuuderes" I'd heard so much about?

"I don't need anything," I said. "My two little sisters showed up at my house all of a sudden, so I came by campus to arrange for them to take the entrance exam. I

just stopped by to see you, since I was in the neighborhood.”

“...Your sisters? Wait, are these your sisters from the other world? Were they brought here as well?”

“Nah. They’re my sisters from this world. They were born and raised here.”

“I see,” Nanahoshi murmured thoughtfully, staring at my face. “Well, if they’re your sisters in this world, I imagine they’re quite adorable.”

“Wait, are you complimenting my looks or something?”

“By the standards of our old world, you’re an objectively handsome man. I don’t know what you looked like on the other side, but right now, you could pass for an European model. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Uh, I guess.” *Wasn’t expecting that...*

I had to watch my step around this girl. In my past life, I might have assumed she had a thing for me. But I wasn’t a virgin anymore, damn it! I wasn’t even single! She wasn’t going to mess with my head that easily.

“How old are they?” Nanahoshi asked.

“They’re both ten, I think.”

“I see. I’ve got a little brother about the same age, actually. But I suppose he’s older than me now, if time’s passing at the same rate back home...”

It was hard to tell through the mask, but she sounded nostalgic, probably remembering her life in Japan. Personally, I didn’t have many pleasant memories associated with the word *brother*.

“Well, now you’ve got me craving pudding,” Nanahoshi muttered.

What? Where did that come from?

"Uh, do you have fond memories of pudding or something?"

"The little jerk used to eat the ones I put in the fridge for later. Those things were really expensive too..."

Classic little brother stuff. It didn't strike me as the sweetest of memories, but it had Nanahoshi homesick, clearly. She was looking up at the ceiling, holding back tears. I averted my eyes to avoid embarrassing her.

"Well, anyway. I'll stop by again soon, okay?" I said.

"All right... Uhm, sorry for all the trouble earlier, by the way. You've improved my opinion of you quite a bit."

"Heh. Just don't fall in love with me, kid. You'll get burned..."

"Excuse me? Are you even hearing yourself right now?"

"Come on! That was supposed to be a laugh line!"

Once I gave her the cue, Nanahoshi did chuckle a little, but it sounded kind of forced. Kids these days! No appreciation for the classics.

At any rate, the girl clearly wasn't in any shape to be conducting experiments today. Not that I had time to help out, either. We'd have to resume our research later, once things had calmed down a bit.

Once the school day was over, I met up with Sylphie and we headed home together. I wanted to get her advice about Norn and Aisha. She was much closer to their age, so I was hoping she might have some insight.

Before I could broach the subject, though, Sylphie spoke up. "Oh, right. Let's stop by the market, Rudy. We've

got more people in the house now, so we're going to need more food."

Sounded reasonable enough to me. We made a little detour.

As soon as we set foot inside the marketplace, the sweet smell of stewing beans hit my nose from all directions. The Commerce District market was always bustling in the evening hours. People tend to think of markets as an early-morning thing, but the ones in this area sold a lot of meat supplied by hunters or adventurers. Hunters had unpredictable schedules, but adventurers tended to spend their days slaying monsters out in the forests or plains. Naturally, the meat they brought back with them in the evenings tended to go on sale at night.

There wasn't much variety in the food available here, and most ingredients were fairly expensive. But the Kingdom of Ranoa and the other Magic Nations were actually better off than most countries in this region; if you could afford it, there was at least meat *available* here. If you headed out further east, you'd find countries where there was little fresh food to be had at any price.

Apart from the market itself, you could also find some jobs for adventurers posted in this area of the city. Most of these involved magically freezing fresh meat—jobs popular with younger university students who'd learned basic magic and needed some pocket change.

Sylphie and I wandered around, picking out ingredients for dinner. I took the opportunity to fill her in about everything that had happened today.

"Well, I think you're right," she said. "It sounds like the two of them don't get along very well."

"I'm not sure what they're thinking, honestly. I guess I don't know how to see the world through a kid's eyes

anymore.”

“It’s tough, yeah.”

“Aisha sounds determined to become our household maid instead of going to school, though. You have any thoughts about that?”

“Hmm. I haven’t been able to devote much time to the housework, what with everything else...so personally, I’d kind of appreciate the help.”

Sylphie’s smile looked sincere. Nice to know she didn’t see it as an intrusion on her domain or anything.

“The thing is, though, we’re the adults here,” I said.
“And she’s a kid.”

“Yep.”

“Do you think we have a responsibility to send her to school? She might end up discovering some new interests there, right?”

“Hmm. Well, maybe you’re right. We could encourage her to take all sorts of weird classes and see if anything appeals to her...” Sylphie paused thoughtfully and put her hand to her chin, seemingly torn between the options I’d placed in front of her.

Then I followed her gaze and realized she was considering two differently priced cuts of ham.

“Come on, Sylphie. I’m seriously conflicted about this. At least think it through with me.”

“I *am* thinking! But you know, Rudy, I’m pretty sure you’re underestimating Aisha a bit. She’s a very clever girl.”

“I know. So what?”

“Well, I think she’ll do just fine for herself whether she goes to school or not.”

“Hmm...”

"That said, maybe we shouldn't be overthinking this. Letting her do what she wants is the simplest option, right?"

I hadn't expected such a strong show of confidence in my sister. But Sylphie had known them when they were much younger, hadn't she? She must have seen what Aisha was capable of firsthand.

"I'm more concerned about Norn, to be honest," she said. "She's obviously anxious, and I think she misses your dad and Ruijerd. We have to make sure we take good care of her, okay?"

"Yeah... You're right about that."

Sylphie's voice was calm, her words reasonable and measured. It made me realize how flustered I was in contrast. My wife really was a reliable woman. This felt like I was being given advice by my old friend, Master Fitz—which I was, in a way.

"So basically, we give Aisha the freedom to do what she wants and put Norn on rails for the moment?" I said.

"On rails?"

"Uh, it means we set a path for her to follow, basically."

"Ah, okay. Yeah. I think that sounds good."

Was it really okay to treat the two of them so differently? Well, Aisha was much further along than Norn right now. Ignoring that fact and treating them exactly the same wouldn't make much sense. Recognizing their differences wasn't the same as playing favorites.

"Uhm... That said, Rudy, it's ultimately your decision. Sorry if I sounded a little bossy."

I shook my head. "Nah, you were a big help. I think I know how I want to approach this now."

"I won't be able to help out that much, though," Sylphie replied, scratching the back of her ear with a troubled expression. "I've still got my duties with Princess Ariel and all..."

Her job did keep her away from home a lot. And she always seemed guilty whenever that caused me even a minor inconvenience. Sometimes, I felt like her job caused her more stress than she was letting on. We were married now, after all, and there was the possibility I'd ask her to quit.

On an impulse, I decided to follow up on this thought.

"Tell me something, Sylphiette, my dear."

"What is it, my dearest Rudeus?"

"Let's say I told you quit your job with Princess Ariel before we got hitched. What would you have done?"

I tried to phrase the question as lightly as possible, but when Sylphie turned to me, her expression was very serious.

"I...might have turned you down, I guess."

Huh? Hmm. That actually stings a little. Maybe I should have built up to the question more gradually or something. Well. Okay, then. So...she'd pick Ariel over me, huh? Right...

"Oh!" Apparently picking up on my reaction, Sylphie suddenly got very flustered. "Don't get the wrong idea, Rudy! I love you very much—you know that! I mean, there's more to it than that, even... I barely know how to explain it, to be honest. It's this big warm jumble of feelings..."

She really was too cute when she got thrown off balance like this.

"Well, I guess they're all different kinds of love, basically. I mean, uh...for one thing, I really want to have a

baby with you..." As she spoke those words, Sylphie reflexively rubbed a hand over her belly.

Now she had me blushing as well. Had she forgotten we were in public?

"But I love Princess Ariel, too, you know? In a different way, of course. She's a really dear friend, I guess..."

I hadn't actually heard her put her feelings about Ariel into words before. Now that she'd got started, though, the words kept coming.

"Princess Ariel might look perfect from the outside, but she has plenty of flaws and weaknesses. I know you'd be just fine without me around, Rudy, but if the princess didn't have me and Luke keeping an eye on her, she wouldn't last a week. I couldn't bear to just abandon her." Sylphie paused for a moment to catch her breath and scratch behind her ears again, then continued awkwardly. "Uhm, but you know...being married to you is, well...it's kind of a dream come true for me. I don't want to give that up either. As long as you'll still have me."

Sylphie seemed to be under the impression that it was unfair of her to even ask this much. Rather than choosing between me and Ariel, she felt like she was taking advantage of my kindness to have her cake and eat it too. Maybe that was why she was always so...accommodating when she was with me.

It was all completely ridiculous, of course.

Instead of responding, I leaned over and planted a kiss on Sylphie's cheek, prompting hoots of amusement and a few jeers from all around us. We'd clearly attracted some attention.

Blushing red out to the tips of her ears, Sylphie quickly put her sunglasses on.

Master Fitz was cuter than ever these days.

After a few minutes, my wife managed to calm down enough so that we could resume our grocery run. We'd drifted off the main topic at some point, but at least I'd gotten her advice on the most important short-term problems. With any luck, she'd hit it off with Norn and Aisha. That would be a *big* help. I wasn't too confident I'd ever be able to understand the mind of a preteen girl.

"Anyway, I might have to lean on you for help with those two sometimes, Sylphie. I'm not great with girls."

"That's okay. We're married, remember? I'll help you out any time you need me."

Sylphie's smile was downright radiant. It was nice to have such a charming *and* reliable wife in my life. Of course, she seemed to think Princess Ariel would be lost without her, whereas I'd be fine on my own. That was...interesting.

By the same token, though, Sylphie could surely manage just fine without *me* around. In that respect, at least, things were no longer like the old days.

One week later, Aisha took her entrance exam as scheduled...and earned a perfect score.

Chapter 2: The Live-In Maid and the Boarding School Student

THAT AFTERNOON, I walked home with Norn and Aisha from the University of Magic.

They'd both taken a standard written test. It was a general exam, given to most potential students regardless of their age. Some sections covered various academic subjects, while others covered the six fundamental disciplines of magic. It didn't sound anything like the test I'd been given, but that was only to be expected.

In any case, Aisha had aced her exam.

The Kingdom of Ranoa had some fundamental cultural differences from Millis. I was pretty sure the curriculum they taught their children was at least a little different. And yet, Aisha had scored perfectly on the first test she'd ever taken in this country.

I had to admit I was impressed. Jenius, likewise, had been so shocked to see a ten-year-old perform so well that he'd offered to admit her in as a special student, under certain conditions. But, of course, that wasn't what I'd promised my sister.

"All right, then. I held up my end of the bargain!" Aisha announced triumphantly as we entered the house. "I'm now officially your servant, Rudeus!"

"You really want to become the family maid, then? Even though you're a *part* of the family?"

"No, no. I'm *your* maid, not the family's!"

So her goal was...to be her brother's personal servant. That struck me as a little bizarre, but I couldn't exactly back out of the bargain now.

"Well, all right. In that case, uh... make sure you do what I tell you from now on, okay?"

"But of course! I'm at your disposal, Master!"

It was kind of nice to hear a girl calling me that for once, rather than Zanoba. If it wasn't my little sister saying it, I'd probably have gotten excited.

Let's just put aside the fact that I was currently a married man.

"That said, let's keep an open mind about your future," I said. "If you end up wanting to study something, just let me know."

"Well, I'm sure there are a few things I still need to learn. Perhaps you'd be so kind as to teach me *personally*, young master..." Putting a finger to her lips, Aisha fluttered her eyes at me.

I caught her drift, but decided it was easiest to play dumb. If the kid ever came out and asked me to teach her how to make babies, I'd have to sit her down and give her a thorough sex ed lecture. *Without* any hands-on demonstrations, of course.

"By the way, is there a reason you're calling me 'master' all of a sudden?"

"Well, I'm going to be your servant from now on, sir. It's only natural that I address you appropriately."

Oh, great. Now she was back to the ridiculous formal language.

"I liked it better when you just called me Rudeus, to be honest. Can't we stick with that?"

"I'm terribly sorry, but I need to maintain at least a semblance of professionalism."

The kid had a solid vocabulary. No wonder she'd done so well on that test.

No point in pushing the issue for now. Sylphie might look at me a little funny for a while, but I felt like Aisha had earned the right to do what she wanted. "Okay, then. Make sure you consult Sylphie before you take on any jobs for yourself, got it?"

"Of course. My mother taught me all about the duties of a maid, I assure you. Leave everything to me."

Folding her hands in front of her, Aisha bowed deeply to me. Apparently, I now had a little sister maid. I had to admit, the words had a strangely powerful ring to them...

They sounded better than *housekeeper* or *dropout*, anyway. Which is probably what they would have called her back in Japan.

Norn's results had been completely ordinary.

From what Jenius told me, she'd scored slightly below average for her age. To be fair, the kid had spent a solid year traveling to this city, and then I'd thrown a test at her before she even had time to get her bearings. She'd probably have done much better if I'd arranged for a few tutoring sessions first. In other words, she'd performed just fine...except in comparison to Aisha.

I didn't see the need to read too much into this. We'd just have to help her improve bit by bit. She might never be at the very top of her class, but what did that matter? As long as she learned the basic skills she needed to function in society, that was good enough for me. You don't have to stand out from the crowd to live a happy, fulfilling life.

"Do you have any thoughts on what you'd like to study, Norn?" I asked.

My sister didn't respond. She was hanging her head again, pouting slightly as she avoided my gaze. It didn't seem like she was warming up to me at all. I'd been hoping to break the ice between us, but I had no idea where to start.

"I don't know all the options that well off the top of my head, I guess," I said. "But I think you usually start off with two or three years of general classes before you have to pick a department, anyway. The University has a lot of interesting introductory courses, so maybe you can try a bunch and see if there's a subject you like? Oh, and if nothing particularly interests you, you could always go with healing magic. Our mom used to be a healer too, remember? There aren't many healers in these parts, so you could land a job easily once you graduate."

Norn wasn't responding to anything I said, so I ended up prattling on for quite a while in this vein. Eventually, I noticed that she was looking at me with an expression that suggested she wanted to speak. I shut my mouth and waited.

"I think I want to try living in the dorms there."

Her voice was tense and anxious, but she'd managed to get the words out. I took a moment to think over what she'd said.

"The dorms, huh...?"

It would have been easy enough to flatly refuse, but I resisted the impulse. It had obviously taken a lot of courage for her to even raise this subject.

My initial reaction was that she was just too young. Ten-year-old girls didn't usually strike it out on their own. However, living in the university dorms wasn't quite the

same as renting a place of your own. You almost always had a roommate, for one thing.

Norn knew almost no one in this city, and she didn't have any friends here. If she lived in the dorms, that could change quickly. Her age might be a bit of a problem on that front, but the University was open to students of all ages. I knew for a fact that there were some kids even younger than her living there. The dorms were a safe environment with some fairly clear rules everyone had to follow. Even a child of Norn's age could live comfortably there, in theory.

Personally, I would have liked to get to know my sister better by living with her. But from the looks of things, forcing her to stick around might just make her resent me even more than she already did.

In my previous life, I'd spent many years as a shut-in. I'd refused to engage with the rest of the world, locking myself up in my room instead. For a while, my family tried all sorts of schemes to get through to me. They tempted me with expensive gifts, bought me delicious food, and talked about my future in bright, optimistic tones. And every single time, it just made me withdraw further from them. It felt like they saw me as an animal in need of training, rather than a human being.

I didn't want Norn to feel like that. I didn't want her to feel trapped here. I didn't want us both to be on edge every single day, trying to read each other's moods and thoughts.

Maybe it would be better for me to keep an eye on her from a distance. If she found a place where she could feel a little more comfortable, maybe it would be easier for us to see each other clearly.

There was the Aisha thing to consider, too. She tended to be condescending with her sister. I'd warned her to be careful, but she didn't even seem aware that she was doing

it half the time. Fixing that was going to be a long-term project. As long as she was living in this house, Norn would be constantly exposed to her sister's scorn. And she'd see me, the brother she despised, every single day.

On top of it all, both Aisha and I both had some unusual natural talents. I didn't think of myself as a world-class magician or anything, but most people considered me highly skilled.

It's tough to grow up "normal" in a house where your siblings are exceptional. I'd been through that myself the last time around.

In the worst-case scenario, I could go so far as to imagine Norn running away from home someday. And I knew how badly that might turn out, especially for a young girl. Some sick bastard might take her in and start demanding favors or something. Compared to that, she'd be much better off moving into a safe dorm room now.

Sylphie spent a lot of time in those dorms too. She did come back to stay here every third night, but in between those visits, she stayed with Princess Ariel. If something came up, she'd be right there to help Norn out, and fortunately, Norn seemed to like her. Maybe they'd opened up to each other in the bath that first night or something.

The more I thought about this, the more it sounded like a decent idea.

Ten was a young age to be living in a dorm... but the experience might be good for her. She'd have to learn how to socialize and cooperate with other kids around her age.

"Okay, Norn. If that's what you want, I think I can arrange it. I'll submit the application for you."

"Wait, what?!" shouted Aisha, her mouth gaping in disbelief. "Why are you letting her do what *she* wants? She didn't even get a good score!"

So much for all that talk about professionalism. It must have slipped her mind at some point in the last five minutes.

“Aisha, I—”

“I worked really hard for this, Rudeus! It isn’t fair!”

I could understand where Aisha was coming from. From her perspective, it must have looked like I was playing favorites with Norn. As far as Aisha was concerned, she’d earned the right to do what she wanted by getting a perfect score on her test. I had to assume she’d done a lot of secret studying over the last week to make that happen.

Norn, on the other hand, hadn’t done much of anything, but I’d decided to give her what she wanted, anyway. It must have seemed blatantly unfair.

What had my parents in my past life said when I kicked up a fuss about things like this? I couldn’t remember exactly, but I felt like it was mostly just variations on “You’ll do what you’re told” or “We know what’s best for you, young man.”

Had those words ever satisfied me? Well, no.

Would the stern approach work on Aisha, then? Nah. Probably not.

She was a very clever kid, of course. If I explained my reasoning in detail, she might understand...maybe? If I was lucky?

It couldn’t hurt to try and talk this out, at least.

“Aisha, I’m not rewarding Norn for anything. I just gave it some thought, and I came to the conclusion that living in the dorms might be what’s best for her.”

“But—”

"Norn doesn't know anyone in this city yet, and... I don't think she likes being around me that much either, unfortunately. I don't want to keep her trapped in this house if she's going to be miserable here."

"But Dad... Dad said we're supposed to live together!"

Hm. That was a decent point. Now I sort of felt tempted to take it all back.

No, no, that wouldn't be right. My job here wasn't to follow my marching orders blindly. Paul made plenty of mistakes himself, right? My judgment wasn't perfect, of course, but I had to trust it for now.

"I'm still going to take care of her, of course. You're both my family, and I'm here for you no matter what. But it seems like Norn isn't happy here, and I think living in the dorms might help her find her footing."

"..."

Now it was Aisha's turn to hang her head in sullen silence. For some reason, there were tears in her eyes.

"Are you being nicer to her because my mom's just the mistress?" she said.

The question took me completely by surprise. The instant I heard the word *mistress*, though, I knew we were in some dangerous territory.

"Lilia isn't a mistress, Aisha. Who told you she was? Was it Dad? I hope it wasn't Norn."

"Mom said it herself! And...Norn's grandma said it, too..." The tears were rolling down her face now.

Lilia and Norn's grandma... So Zenith's family, then.

It was one thing for Lilia to put herself down. I knew she still felt guilty about the whole thing. That was why she'd consciously continued to play the role of the family

maid, rather than acting like my mother's equal. Maybe it was natural that she'd expect Aisha to behave the same way toward Norn, Zenith's daughter. I had to assume that Paul treated both his girls the same. But in Lilia's mind, at least, the two of them weren't equal.

As for the Latria family... From what I'd heard, they were an aristocratic house with a storied history. I'd only met my aunt, Therese, who wasn't a bad person, but as a group, they probably had some very fixed ideas about adultery and social status. They'd probably doted on Norn while ignoring Aisha altogether. They weren't related to her by blood, after all.

Logically, it was hard for me to blame them or Lilia for their actions.

"Do you like her better...because I'm just your half-sister...? Hic..." Aisha was sobbing now, rubbing her fists against her crumpled face.

But whatever their reasons, they'd still hurt an innocent child.

I'd been operating under some mistaken assumptions here. *Neither* of my sisters was going to be easy to take care of.

"Aisha, I've never thought of Lilia as my Dad's mistress. And as far as I'm concerned, you and Norn are both my sisters, plain and simple."

"But I...I studied so hard for that test... I tried so hard... and Norn just...just gets to..."

In between sniffles, Aisha stammered out more complaints.

So she *had* crammed secretly for the test. That must have been...stressful. I'd only given her a week's warning, after all. She'd obviously earned that perfect score.

"Listen, Aisha."

"Wh-what?"

"It might be hard for me to explain this, but I do understand. I know you worked really hard, and I'm proud of you. That's why I agreed to let you do what you wanted."

"But you said...you said Norn can go live in the dorms, and she..." Aisha sniffled loudly at this point, letting her lower lip quiver. It was an effective technique, but I didn't back down. I wasn't actually being unfair here.

"That's different, Aisha. I'm taking this on a case-by-case basis, okay? If you told me you wanted to go live in the dorms right now, you'd have my permission to do so. But if Norn said she wanted to stay here and do housework instead of going to school, I wouldn't allow that. You earned the right to do that with your score on that test."

Aisha frowned and fell silent.

And after a painfully long pause, she finally replied, "Okay." My arguments clearly hadn't satisfied her, but she'd ultimately accepted them.

Norn just looked on quietly, not looking particularly happy herself.

If nothing else, I felt like I was beginning to get a sense of the situation here. Zenith's family had treated Aisha as the illegitimate daughter of Paul's mistress, and Aisha had channeled that into trying to be better than Norn at everything. My dad probably hadn't treated them differently, but circumstances still drove a wedge between them. Their relationship had been twisted out of shape long before they reached me.

Still, the Latria family was a very long way from us now. No one in this city was going to sneer at Aisha because of

who her mother was. As long as I played my part carefully, this problem would eventually fade away.

“By the way, Norn, there is one condition on that offer. I want you to come visit us here once every ten days, at a minimum.”

Norn frowned at this. “Why?”

“Because I’m worried about you.”

Also, I had a responsibility to keep an eye on her. It wouldn’t feel too good to tell Paul that I tossed his darling daughter into a dorm and then forgot about her.

“...Okay, then.” Though she looked extremely reluctant, Norn did at least agree.

Now that we’d finally worked out an initial plan, it was time for us to rearrange our lives to accommodate it.

I arranged to have Norn enrolled at the University of Magic, and I applied to secure her a spot in the dorms. Of course, I also explained the situation with Sylphie and asked her to help Norn out if she ran into any trouble there.

“What? You’re really going to push Norn away like that?” Sylphie was critical of my plan at first. Her first impulse was to keep Norn in our house so we could shower her with affection until she started to trust us a little more. It wasn’t an unreasonable option, but based on how uncomfortable Norn had looked in that first week, I couldn’t convince myself it was our best bet.

“I think Aisha and Norn might be better off living separately for a little while,” I said. “It seems like my mom’s family gave Aisha a hard time about being the daughter of a

'mistress,' you know? I don't want to push Norn away, but I think they both need some space right now."

"Hmm... Well, I didn't know any of that. All right, then. I guess I'll just have to keep an eye on Norn whenever I can."

Sylphie wouldn't be there every day, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully, this would all work out for the best.

Aisha, for her part, quickly assumed her new role as our household maid.

She was very good at it too. As soon as she started taking over the housework, our lives got noticeably easier. She was already handling both the cleaning and the laundry, which basically meant all my chores had disappeared. I couldn't rub my face against Sylphie's dirty underwear anymore, but I'd just have to deal with that as best I could.

Sylphie was still in charge of the grocery shopping and the cooking, at least. That was one role she wanted to hold on to. But Aisha was always there to help her out.

Apart from these primary tasks, my new maid also began to deal with a number of things that had never even occurred to me before. She went around greeting our neighbors, for example, and arranged to have our chimney swept. The girl was sharp as a tack and a hard worker to boot. She excelled at everything she put her mind to, and I never saw her make a major mistake. I had to imagine a lot of work went into maintaining that image of perfection.

For whatever reason, it seemed she was serious about making this maid thing into her full-time occupation. When she was on the job, she dropped the clingy little sister act and turned into an almost robotic professional. Lilia's training had obviously been very thorough.

In general, Aisha spent most of her working hours helping out around the house. When we got home, she'd help Sylphie with dinner or help me get a bath ready. When we were bathing, she'd lay out a change of clothes for us, then brush Sylphie's hair afterward. And on the nights when Sylphie went back out for her night shift, she'd bring her coat to the door and see her off with a polite bow.

Sylphie, who wasn't used to being fussed over like this, reacted awkwardly to Aisha's attention. It was always fun to watch them interact.

When we had guests over, Aisha also made sure to keep them happy and entertained. Not that this happened very often. The only person who'd stopped by recently was Nanahoshi, seeking to formally thank me for my earlier help. She'd apparently ordered something for me as a reward: the magic circle for a specific Summoning spell that I might find helpful. She promised to hand it over and explain how to use it before we moved on to the second stage of her experiments.

Aisha had jumped at the chance to lavish her hospitality on our guest. She'd drawn a bath for Nanahoshi, prepared her a change of clothes, and even helped her wash up in there.

Nanahoshi had seemed distinctly aggravated by all the attention. When she left, she'd grumbled something at me about what a "monster" I was for "working my own little sister to the bone."

I think she preferred her baths to be peaceful, quiet, and solitary. I'd have to remember to ask Aisha to give her some privacy in there next time.

The girl didn't even relax after dinner. When I settled down in the living room, she'd bustle around keeping the fire roaring or bringing me warm drinks. To be honest, it felt

kind of weird to have my own sister acting like my personal servant. But Aisha seemed happy with the arrangement, so I was willing to let things continue like this for a while. I didn't want to force her to do anything she didn't want to.

After reaching this conclusion, though, I remembered my theory that your mana capacity is partially determined by how much you use magic as a child. If Aisha wasn't going to attend school, I could at least give her a little training in magic. At the age of ten, her mana capacity probably wasn't going to change that much, but it wasn't set in stone either. And she'd be better off knowing at least Intermediate-tier offensive magic too. The Beginner spells were enough for an ordinary person living a peaceful life, but the Intermediate ones were more useful if you ever needed to defend yourself.

"Aisha, come over here. Let's practice magic for a while."

"Ooh! Are you going to teach me, Rudeus?! Really?!"

Aisha trotted over to me with a big smile on her face. For all her discipline, the kid tended to let the "cool-headed maid" character drop whenever she got emotional about something. She still had a ways to go before she'd be a match for Lilia.

"Yeah, I think it's a good idea for you to learn a little more. I know you might not be that interested, but—"

"But I am, though! Of course I am!" she said, hopping up into my lap. "Please go right ahead!"

The girl could be awful cute when she wanted to.

Our first tutoring session was a productive one. Aisha already had a good grasp of the fundamentals; she hadn't taken the time to learn the Intermediate spells, but I got the feeling she could have picked them up fairly quickly from the right textbook. She wasn't capable of silent spellcasting,

though. Ten was probably too late to learn that particular skill.

I ran through a few things, then gave her a simple homework assignment: to use as much magic as she could every day, until her supply of mana ran dry.



That night, Aisha clambered onto my bed and asked, “Can I sleep with you tonight, Rudeus?”

After seeing her break down in tears the other day, I couldn’t bring myself to say no. And it wasn’t like it could do any harm, anyway.

“Sure thing. C’mom.”

Without a word of complaint, I pulled back the covers and made room for her.

Aisha was smaller than Sylphie, of course, but also warmer. In a cold climate like this, it never hurt to have another heated, huggable pillow in your bed.

Of course, this was all purely innocent. Apart from the fact that she was my sister, she was also just a kid. She seemed to have learned a few double entendres at some point, but she probably didn’t really understand them. There was no reason to feel too awkward about any of it.

If Aisha *did* eventually develop some sort of a crush on me, I’d just have to convince her to give it up. I don’t know if sister-kissing was inherently immoral or anything, but I liked my family the way it was.

And that was how things generally went on the nights Sylphie was away.

The real problem arose on the next night my wife was around. Specifically, when we got into bed together.

Now that my little sisters were living with us, I’d decided to hold off on our intimate activities for a while. But when I had a beautiful woman lying next to me, it proved impossible to resist.

Normally, I could have contained myself. But normally, I had the opportunity to blow off some steam on my own.

Unfortunately, Aisha tended to follow me all around the house. I had no privacy these days, and I wasn't about to start pleasuring myself in the school bathrooms or something. The idea was kind of depressing, especially for a happily married man.

Unable to find a good solution, I ended up letting things build up for quite a while. I was a young, energetic man. After a solid week with no release at all, I was about ready to explode. And right next to me, there was a cute woman. A cute woman who loved me, never said no, and had earnestly promised to have my baby.

The idea of holding back seemed ridiculous. So I didn't.

"Phew..."

I ended up going a little overboard, though. I'd locked the door beforehand and used some basic earth magic to muffle the sounds, but...hopefully Aisha hadn't peeked in through the keyhole or anything.

"Wow, you were...*really* something today, Rudy..."

By the time it was over, Sylphie was exhausted. She was drenched in sweat, and her hair was all messed up in a very alluring way.

After a few minutes of pillow talk, we wiped ourselves down with towels, put on our usual nightclothes, and sat down on the bed together.

Our nightclothes were made of a soft, comfortable fabric, but they were a bit plain-looking—more like sweatsuits than pajamas. Sylphie seemed to think hers wasn't too flattering, but I personally disagreed. When I looked at her sitting on the bed, it felt like I'd coaxed a girl from the track team into my room or something. The lack of explicit sexiness only made it more exciting.

You wouldn't get this effect with flashy red lingerie, like the set Eris had. Or with a curvier girl like Linia or Pursena. Plainer clothes just *worked* on Sylphie, for some reason.

"..."

"Hm? What's up, Rudy?"

At some point while I was thinking all this, I'd started running my hands along my wife's slender body from behind.

I was very fond of her body. Sylphie wasn't the most curvaceous, but she wasn't flat either. There was almost no fat on her, but she was still soft to the touch. Just touching her like this was enough to get my lightning rod pointing toward the heavens.

"Uh...do you want *more*?"

"No, no. You've got, uh, work tomorrow and everything. I'll be good! Just let me...rub your chest in the morning? Please? I'll be okay."

"Don't be silly. There's no need to hold back." Sylphie lay back on the bed, opened her legs, and smiled shyly up at me. "C'mere, Rudy."

My self-control instantly collapsed into its component parts and disappeared into the wind. The word *restraint* no longer held any meaning for me. Ripping off my clothes roughly, I pressed my hands together and executed a beautiful swan dive toward my waiting wife.

Moving on, then...

Norn had been rather docile for the last few days as we prepared for her move to the school dorms. She didn't say much of anything to me, but it wasn't like she was being hostile either. She came when I called for her, and she

listened when I asked her to do something. But it sure didn't feel like we were getting any closer.

I was still hoping to improve our relationship, of course. I'd actually tried inviting her to take a bath with me the other day, thinking it might be a decent way to break the ice. Unfortunately, she just grimaced and said, "No."

Aisha promptly popped her head into her room and volunteered to go with me instead. She ended up washing my back and giving me a nice little massage.

That girl really could do anything she set her mind to. She was even good at rinsing people down...not that I wanted her pursuing any career where that was relevant.

Within a few days, I managed to finalize the arrangements for Norn's enrollment at the University. Her roommate was a fourth-year student, like Nanahoshi. I'd been hoping for a fifth- or sixth-year, since I knew more people in those classes.

The girl also turned out to look something like a parrot-human hybrid. She had a big, colorful crest on her head that twitched when she was excited or upset. I wasn't sure if her people were demons or beastfolk, but it didn't really matter. In any case, her name was Marissa, and I hadn't heard anything bad about her.

Come to think of it, this school had a really diverse student body, with lots of mixed-race people. I'd have to remind Norn to mind her manners and not say anything that might offend someone.

I did try to introduce myself to Marissa, by the way. But when I approached her with a smile, she flinched in fear and

ran for her life. I didn't even get to say a word to her. Given that reaction, it was probably best if Norn didn't mention she was related to me at school. Lots of people seemed to think I was the boss of some sort of gang. The last thing I wanted was for my reputation to scare kids away from making friends with her.

No point in worrying about that now, anyway. Trying to fix all Norn's problems for her would be way too overbearing. If I needed to, I could always turn to Sylphie, Luke, and Ariel. They were incredibly popular and always seemed to draw a crowd wherever they went. Spending time with them might help Norn learn some social skills.

Then again...there was a chance their fans would just get jealous of her. But maybe that was the kind of adversity she needed to learn how to face...

Hrrm. Why does this stuff have to be so damn complicated, anyway?

At the end of the day, Norn needed to face up to this herself. It was best for me to keep out of it until something actually went wrong. For now, my job was to watch quietly.

I was still nervous as hell about it, though.

Soon enough, the day of Norn's departure arrived. When I saw her that morning, she was already wearing her new uniform and carrying her bag.

Before she left, I gave her a few important things to remember. First, she needed to respect the dorm rules. Secondly, she needed to take her studies seriously. And thirdly, she needed to be respectful to any demons she ran into.

I had a lot of other things I wanted to say, but it seemed best to keep it simple for now.

"Oh, right. One more thing... If you get into any trouble at school, make sure you tell me or Sylphie about it."

"Okay," Norn replied quietly, studying the door frame next to me. Was she ever going to start looking me in the eyes? I was starting to feel kind of anxious about it.

"Remember to brush your teeth when you wake up and before you go to bed."

"Yeah."

"Make sure you take your baths too."

"Right."

"Don't forget to do your homework either."

"...Sure."

Let's see, what else... Oh, right!

"Try not to catch any colds."

"..."

Well, now she was *glaring* at me. That was something, at least.

Interlude: Master/Servant Relations

LET'S GO BACK IN TIME a little. Before we tell the rest of this story, I want to mention something that happened about a week before Nanahoshi's breakdown.

"Master! Take a look at this!"

The instant I set foot inside Zanoba's laboratory that day, he called out to me, trotting over with a box in his arms. His face was shining with pride.

"What is it?"

"It's an arm from that doll we've been studying."

Setting the box down on a nearby table, Zanoba took out its contents—a long slender object covered in cloth. Unwrapping it, he revealed the artificial arm in question. He'd sliced it up into sections like a carrot.

"When I looked closely at the places where the paint had chipped off, I noticed what looked like seams in its surface. I tried cutting along them, just to see what might happen...and *this* is what I found."

Picking up one of the slices, Zanoba turned it so I could see the cross-section. It was covered in an intricate pattern that reminded me of a QR code. This had to be a magic circle of some kind, but it was a peculiar one, totally unlike anything I'd seen Nanahoshi make.

It wasn't just that cross-section either. Similar patterns were present on every single section of the arm, both the front and back surfaces, and they were all slightly different from each other. Even the ones that shared a section weren't identical.

"Wow. Okay. I didn't expect the arms to be packed full of magic circles, honestly... It's interesting that they're all so different from each other, too..."

Looking at them for a while actually got me feeling kind of queasy. It almost felt like we were studying the nervous system of a dissected human body or something.

"I had no idea there even were seams on that thing. They must have been really subtle."

"Well, they were mostly hidden by the paint," said Zanoba proudly. "It would have been impossible to notice them without first chipping it away."

"I see..."

This was Zanoba's first big breakthrough in his research, and he was obviously very excited about it. I wasn't quite as jazzed, since I'd assumed from the start there had to be some sort of complex magical technology animating the thing.

"Its movements were very smooth and coordinated, now that I think about it. I guess you need a lot of magical circles to make that possible," I mused.

"Oh? Can you tell what function these patterns would perform, Master?"

"Nope. Never seen anything like them before."

Were all of these necessary just to move the arm? Maybe you needed to have a chain of magic circles all throughout the body to control and coordinate its movements? There was always a chance they served some totally different function, too. It was impossible to tell without further research.

Until I encountered it, this thing had wandered around that house every night, cleaning up and attacking any threats that it identified. Once its cleaning routine was over,

it returned to its home base for recharging. When you thought about it, those were some very complex behavioral patterns. It was smarter than your average robot vacuum... and significantly more violent.

Not something you could create by etching a couple magic circles on its head or torso, I had to imagine.

My goal here wasn't just to create a magical Roomba. I wanted to make dolls that could move. I wanted some for myself, and I wanted to sell some for profit. They'd definitely command a high price on the market.

I wasn't looking to become a millionaire or anything, you understand. I just wanted some financial security. If I got myself a massive windfall, I'd probably just get careless and squander it.

There was also that whole plan about using my work to improve the reputation of the Superd to consider. Although that was kind of a separate issue.

In any case, this was all just a pipe dream for the moment. But maybe, one day I'd have the robot maid of my dreams.

"I'm guessing the magic circles most directly responsible for its movements are probably in the head or torso, Zanoba. Try to be careful if you cut there."

"Of course, master!" Zanoba replied with a cheerful nod.

In retrospect, I think this discovery was the reason Zanoba was able to come up with his helpful suggestion when Nanahoshi had her meltdown later. And, thanks to that suggestion, Nanahoshi succeeded in the creation of her own multi-layered magic circles. She even realized her goal

of summoning things from a parallel universe, which she'd very nearly given up on.

One day, we'd surely realize our own dream of creating the perfect maid robot. And maybe that day would come sooner than expected.

Lately, that thought put a spring in my step whenever I headed over to Zanoba's lab.

"Coming in, Zanoba!"

I knocked once at my friend's door, then stepped into his chambers. I found myself face to face with a woman who stood by the entrance like she was on guard duty. She wasn't a supermodel, but she had a kind face.

"Oh! Hey, Ginger! It's good to see you again."

For a moment, the woman studied me suspiciously. But when I greeted her, she relaxed and bowed her head slightly. "Hello, Sir Rudeus. It's been too long."

Her name was Ginger York, and she was a former knight of Shirone and the loyal bodyguard of Third Prince Zanoba. Seeing her again made me feel a bit nostalgic.

"I've meant to stop by and say hello," Ginger continued, "but things have been a bit hectic..."

"Don't worry about it. I should have come over myself, honestly. You escorted my sisters here free of charge, and I didn't even take the time to thank you."

"I ought to be thanking you. Miss Aisha saved us a great deal of time on our journey."

Ginger stepped aside with a smile, and I headed into Zanoba's laboratory.

Zanoba and Julie were hard at work at their own projects, as always. Zanoba was sketching diagrams of the magic circles he'd found inside the doll, and Julie was

working on her latest figure with a small chisel. That project looked close to completion, so I headed over to inspect it first.

“How’s it coming along, Julie?”

“I think it...should be done soon, Grandmaster. What do you think?”

“Hey, that’s not half bad. It looks a little too handsome to be Zanoba, though.”

“That’s not true. Master’s handsome, too.”

Her sculpting was still a bit sloppy, but she was starting to get a good grasp on the fundamentals. I could offer a few criticisms on the fine details, but since the kid seemed to have a knack for this, it was probably better to let her keep figuring things out for herself.

I glanced over in Zanoba’s direction, but it looked like he needed some time to finish up. It was at this point that I noticed Ginger was staring at me.

“What is it, Ginger?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking...you’ve done a lot of growing up, that’s all.”

“Well, of course I did. It’s been what, four years since the last time we saw each other?”

I felt like a lot of people had been commenting on my appearance lately. Maybe I was starting to develop some sex appeal or something. If I hadn’t married Sylphie, maybe I could have built myself a harem? The idea had a certain appeal, but it would probably be kind of stressful in practice. I was satisfied with my sex life as it was, anyway.

“By the way, Ginger, what are you planning to do next?”

“I intend to stay here, at Prince Zanoba’s side.”

"Oh. So you're resuming your duties as his bodyguard?"

"That's right. I've completed my other mission, and my family back home is being taken care of."

The woman's loyalty really was impressive. She'd protected Lilia and Aisha for years at her master's command before finally seeing them to safety. Had Zanoba shown her any appreciation, though? Or even thanked her? Probably not. The guy wasn't the most thoughtful of employers.

"Hey, Zanoba. Don't you think you should give Ginger a reward for all her hard work?"

"Sir Rudeus! I wouldn't presume to ask—"

"Hm, I suppose you're right," said Zanoba, still focused on his magic circles. "Is there aught that you desire, Ginger? Speak freely."

The prince could sure sound pompous when he wanted to.

Ginger seemed taken aback by this development. This was presumably the first time Zanoba had given her any sort of recognition for her efforts.

After thinking it over a few long moments, she dropped to one knee, lowered her head, and spoke. "Well, then, my lord...would you allow me to see to Julie's education? I understand that she is Sir Rudeus' pupil, but her manner ill befits the servant of a prince."

"Very well. I shall allow it."

"Thank you, Prince Zanoba!"

This really wasn't what I'd had in mind. I mean, educating Julie was ultimately for Zanoba's good, not Ginger's. Then again, maybe there was some unspoken rule that slaves weren't supposed to receive too much education?

Humanity was driven out of the Garden of Eden because they ate the fruit of knowledge. Stay ignorant, and you might be perfectly happy to spend the rest of your life dancing around with a fig leaf over your crotch, singing, “Yatta,” all day long. That’s why kings prefer their subjects to be as clueless as possible. The less you educate them, the less likely they are to rise up against you. Of course, you’re also sabotaging their ability to learn new skills and become more useful, but that’s a trade-off lots of rulers are willing to make.

In any case... I guess it would have been tricky for Zanoba to grant Ginger a more typical reward like land or treasure anyway, given his current position. She’d probably realized that and kept her request modest out of loyalty.

“Well, all right, then,” I said. “Back to the grind, I guess. How far have you gotten?”

“I was planning to work on the legs next, Master.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that, and I feel like it might be better for us to thoroughly study the circles from inside the arms first. I mean, it’s not like you can piece the body parts back together once you’ve cut them open, right? Might be better to take it slow.”

“Hmm, that is true...”

“Maybe we can bring in Cliff and Nanahoshi to take a look. They might notice something that we’re missing.”

Zanoba and I leaned over the table and discussed our plans at some length, before ultimately deciding to start dissecting the doll’s second arm for comparison to the first. Just as we were about to get started, though, I noticed Ginger standing next to me. It looked like she had something to say.

“Do you need something, Ginger?”

“Sir Rudeus...despite his current circumstances, Prince Zanoba is a member of the royal family of Shirone. I know he is your pupil as an artist, but the way you speak to him still strikes me as...less than respectful.”

“Hm?”

Now that she mentioned it, I’d been more familiar than usual with him today. I was usually a bit more formal in my speech, but after Aisha’s remark the other day, I’d unconsciously loosened up a bit.

I could understand why a loyal retainer would be annoyed to hear their master addressed in that way. I’d just have to be more polite when Ginger was around.

“I suppose you’re right. Sorry about that. Prince Zanoba’s been a good friend to me, so I guess I just—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Zanoba jumped to his feet with fury in his eyes.

“Gingeeeeer!”

Springing toward his bodyguard, he grabbed her by the neck and slammed her up against the wall. Julie flinched at the sound and dropped her chisel.

“How dare you?! Master Rudeus was finally opening up to me, and now you’ve ruined everything! How could you? Take it back! Apologize to him immediately!”

“Guh... Guhh!”

Ginger looked to be in some serious pain. Was he actually squeezing her neck? This was escalating way too fast!

“Zanoba!” I shouted. “Stop it! Let her go!”

Zanoba immediately opened his hand and let Ginger fall. His fingers had left clear red marks on her skin. Ginger tried to reach up to touch her neck, but stopped halfway,

grimacing in pain. It looked like he'd broken a bone in her shoulder when he slammed her against the wall.

I quickly rushed over and healed her injuries with my magic. And as soon as I was done, she kneeled down in front of me and lowered her head.

"Cough...cough...my sincere apologies, Sir Rudeus..."

She was actually *apologizing* to me. After Zanoba had nearly killed her.

I was speechless with guilt for a moment. She hadn't done anything wrong. Why was she apologizing to *me*?

Finally, I spun around and glared at Zanoba. "What is the matter with you?!"

"But Master! She thoughtlessly interjected, knowing *nothing* of our friendship—"

"Okay, maybe so! Why didn't you just say *that* to her, then?!"

Ginger had served Zanoba faithfully for many years. And she'd protected my family on a long, dangerous journey through unfamiliar territory. It couldn't have been easy, but she'd come all this way out of nothing but loyalty for her exiled master.

And when she made a *single* mistake, his reaction was to throw her up against a wall and start choking her? That was just awful.

Our friendship was obviously very important to Zanoba. That was nice to know. But that didn't mean I wanted him mistreating his most loyal guard over it.

"Sir Rudeus, please... It's quite all right," said Ginger softly, her face calm and composed. "I'm proud to see Prince Zanoba stand up for a friend. He's clearly grown as a person since the last time I saw him."

What? Seriously? Am I the one being weird here?

Maybe it wasn't my place to say anything, but Ginger obviously deserved much better treatment than this.

"...Zanoba."

"Yes, Master?"

"I consider you a good friend."

Zanoba's face shone with happiness at those words. I paused for a moment to let him savor them.

"But I owe Ginger a lot for protecting my family too. She stuck with them for...what, four years? I'm really grateful to her for that, and I'd appreciate it if you treated her with more kindness."

"Of course, Master," said Zanoba with a serious expression on his face. "I apologize for my actions, Ginger."

"There's no need to apologize, Prince Zanoba," Ginger objected, rising to her feet. "I swore an oath of absolute loyalty to you, and I would willingly die at your command. My remark was thoughtless. I sincerely regret what I said."

That seemed to be her final word on things, and I saw no point in dragging this out any longer. This was evidently just how the master-servant relationship worked here. What if Zanoba ever made a serious mistake, though? Could Ginger even bring herself to disagree with him?

Well, whatever. I was basically an outsider here. I didn't understand how things worked in Shirone, and if I kept butting in, I'd probably just invite more trouble.

That alarming incident aside, our research on the automaton was starting to make some real progress.

"I know I suggested focusing on the arms for now, but it's your call. Go with whatever you think is best."

“I appreciate that, but I agree with your suggestion, Master. Piecing the entire doll back together after we’ve dissected it might prove difficult. Let’s see if we can recreate its arm before moving on to the rest.”

We spent the rest of the session focused on disassembling and studying the doll’s arms. I’d suggested bringing in Cliff or Nanahoshi to help out, but I was leaving those decisions entirely up to Zanoba. There were some things I wanted to try, of course, but it seemed like he was making good progress on his own so far. I didn’t feel the need to meddle.

“I think you can leave the rest to me, Master. It seems I have some talent for this sort of work.”

“Huh. No kidding?”

“No. I was a bit surprised as well, but I find the work quite engaging. I’m enjoying myself quite a lot these days.”

He got to spend the whole day on research that appealed to him, with a dedicated figurine artist working constantly at his side. This was probably as good it got for Zanoba. Still, what was he planning to do after he graduated? Would he keep hanging around this city, playing with his dolls?

Well, that was another thing he’d have to work out on his own. It wasn’t really my problem to worry about...even if he was here, in part, because of me.

“Well, okay, then. Keep at it, Zanoba! I’ll stop by again soon.”

“I look forward to that, Master.”

“Be nice to Ginger, okay?”

“Of course!”

At this rate, maybe we’d have another breakthrough before too long.

Chapter 3: The Boss and His Flunkies

SOMEHOW ANOTHER MONTH had slipped by, which meant it was time for the regularly scheduled meeting of the Ranoa University of Magic's foremost gang of delinquents. By which I mean the "special class" homeroom. The attendees were the usual suspects: Zanoba, Julie, Cliff, Linia, Pursena, and me. Nanahoshi and Badigadi were absent, since the rules didn't really apply to them.

I wasn't in the best mood this morning. I'd been thinking a lot about my sisters lately...specifically Norn. She'd been living in the dorms for some time now, but giving her the space she wanted hadn't exactly improved our relationship. She usually ignored me when we passed each other in the halls. When she didn't, she just shot me disgusted glares.

Okay, maybe that last part was just my persecution complex at work. But in any case, the two of us weren't getting any closer.

That was okay, though. It made me kind of sad, but I could live with it. It wasn't like brothers and sisters had to be best friends or anything. And even if we didn't get along that well normally, I'd still step in to help Norn if she ever needed me.

Hell, I'd be on her professors like a helicopter parent if I had to. My position near the top of this school's pecking order could come in handy there. I could step in to take care of anyone who tried to bully her, for example. And I knew the vice principal personally, so I could turn to him for help if I had to. It's always nice to know you can go over people's

heads. I made a note to bring Jenius a few modest presents every once in a while.

The real problem was this: Norn had been living in that dorm for about a month, but it looked like she hadn't made a single friend yet. When I saw her in the hallways, she was usually alone. She didn't look particularly sad or anything, but it was starting to bother me.

You can get by without friends for a while, sure. But was she at least talking to the other people in her class? Was she adjusting to life in the dorms?

I was genuinely worried, but I didn't want to get directly involved either. And I didn't know many first-year students. The only one who came to mind was a total delinquent, in fact. If I tried to get him to do something, I felt like Norn would figure it out at once and then probably resent me for it.

Also, I didn't even remember that guy's name. I did recall that he looked a lot like a Siberian husky, though.

"All right there, Boss?" said Linia, leaning down to look me in the face. "You've been lookin' awful gloomy lately."

"Yeah, fer real," added Pursena.

As loud and irritating as these two could be, half the beastfolk in this school idolized them. Even after they made peace with Princess Ariel, you'd often see them wandering the halls surrounded by a pack of loyal lackeys. Somehow, I doubted they'd have much advice to offer on the subject of loneliness.

"Well, don't worry, meow. We gotcha a special present to cheer you up!"

"Yep. Took us a whole month."

With a sly smile, Linia dropped a large lumpy bag onto my desk.

I looked down at it dubiously. It was hard to tell what might be inside.

"Hold yer horses there, Boss! Don't open that until you get back home."

"Unwrap it in private, ya got that? Make sure no one's lookin'."

This was starting to sound seriously fishy. Hopefully, this wasn't a sack of happy powder or anything. I knew at least a couple kinds of narcotics were making the rounds of the Northern Territories and parts of the Demon Continent. Millis and Asura apparently had some laws restricting their usage, but most of the nations in this region weren't too strict about it.

Naturally, I had no intentions of picking up a drug habit. If I got addicted or went into withdrawal, my magic wouldn't be enough to heal me. You needed Saintly-tier Detoxification spells to deal with that sort of thing. More to the point, I wasn't that desperate to escape reality at the moment.

Still, the stuff might come in handy at some point, so I didn't see a reason to refuse. I could always just sell it if I ever got desperate for cash.

"Well, uh...thanks, I guess."

"Yer welcome, Boss!"

"Anything fer you, man."

Come to think of it..these two lived in the dorms, didn't they? Since they'd been there for six years now, they probably knew everyone and everything there was to know. Maybe they'd have some useful information, if not advice.

"About what you said, though... The thing is, I'm kind of worried about my little sister."

"Your little sister? Yeah, I think we ran into her once already. That's the little girl you got dolled up like a maid, right?"

"We saw her in the market the other day. She had your scent all over her, Boss. Figured you were related."

So they'd already met Aisha, huh? She was getting into bed with me on a regular basis, which probably explained the scent thing.

"No, not her. I mean my other sister. She's been living in the dorms for a month now."

"Huh?! Wait, there's another one?!"

"And she's livin' in the *dorms*?"

Linia and Pursena turned to look at each other, their eyes opening wide. Apparently, they hadn't run into Norn yet...or maybe they had, without realizing she was my sister. She didn't spend much time at home, so she probably wouldn't smell like me.

"Yeah, that's right," I said. "I don't think she likes me very much, though. We've barely even spoken to each other for a while. I don't know how to get her to warm up to me."

"Errrrr...yeah, that m-might be tricky..."

"We could go around yellin' about how cool you are, if ya want..."

Hmm. I hadn't considered an information warfare strategy. Maybe Norn *would* be more willing to give me a chance if she thought I was the most popular guy in school. But if I gave the job to Linia and Pursena, they'd probably just spread a bunch of nonsense about me beating the crap out of people.

I'd prefer more of the "Rudeus saved a puppy" angle, honestly. Maybe an edited version of the day I met Julie would work.

"Anyway, the real problem is that she doesn't seem to have any friends yet," I said. "She's only been here for a month, so maybe it's too early for me to be worrying about this... But she's a transfer student, you know? I bet she's having a hard time fitting in."

"W-well, it's early, right?"

"Yeah. Maybe, uh...she just hasn't had the time to get to know people yet?"

For some reason, Linia and Pursena seemed a little anxious. They were stumbling over their words, and that usually meant they were hiding something from me.

"Please don't tell me you two have been picking on my sister."

"N-now you're just being dumb!"

"Of course not, Boss! You told us not to pick on anybody weaker than us!"

Okay. So why are you going pale, then?

There was definitely something going on here, though I didn't know what yet. In any case, I could probably take advantage of their guilty consciences to ensure they'd intervene if anyone tried to bully Norn.

"H-how old is your little sister, Boss?"

"Is she older than the maid one? Or younger?"

"Uh, they're the same age. She's ten."

"Really?! Phew!"

"Good to hear! Yeah, we didn't do nothin' to her."

In other words, they'd done *something* to *somebody*. Maybe they made a habit of teaching cocky new students their place in the pecking order or something?

"So Boss, uh, about that present..."

“Don’t get mad at us if you don’t like it, okay? We worked really hard on it.”

It seemed kind of weird that they were revisiting this topic now. Why did they look so nervous about it all of a sudden? It was a little bit unsettling, but I was definitely curious to find out what they’d gotten me at this point.

“Hey, it’s the thought that counts, right? I won’t get mad, I promise.”

I wouldn’t exactly be overjoyed to find a bunch of dead mice inside or anything, but I wasn’t going to hold it against them.

At this point, I noticed Cliff looking at me from his seat a few spots over.

“Hey. You have any advice for this thing with my sister, Cliff?”

“...Hmph. Who says you *need* friends, anyway?”

Wow. Did somebody need a hug today or what?

Still, Cliff wasn’t the loner he used to be anymore. He had Elinalise now. And me, for whatever that was worth. Maybe Norn would never be as popular as *that* social butterfly, but I had to hope she’d get to know a few people herself one of these days.

Recently, Nanahoshi had begun showing up at the dining hall around lunchtime. Maybe she’d finally figured out the importance of eating actual meals. Not that she was being particularly sociable about it...

Noticing my gaze, she turned to glare at me. “You need something?”

“Nah, not really.”

Although Nanahoshi had taken the initiative to introduce Japanese cooking to the campus, she'd almost never ventured out to sample the results until now. She didn't like the food much, and she usually looked a little miserable when she was eating it.

"You don't seem to be enjoying that," I said.

"Well, I'm not. I know I'm the one who came up with the recipe, but it's terrible."

"The ingredients here aren't as good as what we had back in Japan, I guess."

"That's for sure."

"Is there any kind of food from this world that you do like?"

"Those potato chips I ate at your house, I guess. Those were good."

I guess she meant the ones Sylphie made at home. That made sense. Simple snacks like those didn't taste that different from the ones we had back in Japan.

"Want us to make you more?"

"...That won't be necessary."

Okay, then. Next time she came over to use our bath, I'd have some waiting for her.

Badigadi wasn't here today, either. He used to stop by the dining hall on a regular basis, but I hadn't seen him at all in the last month. I really wanted to sit down with him and have a talk about Ruijerd.

At least Julie's table manners were starting to improve a little in his absence. Ginger was teaching her some basic etiquette, but it would have been a lost cause with the big man around. The place felt a little empty without him, though. I kind of missed that constant booming laughter of

his. The more you laugh, the more you live, right? Maybe I should give it a shot myself.

“Fwahahahaha!”

“Uh, wh-why are you laughing? Did I do something funny?”

“Master?”

“Grandmaster...?”

All my experiment earned was a bunch of puzzled looks from everyone at the table. It was kind of embarrassing, to be honest. I guess I wasn’t cut out to fill Badigadi’s shoes.

“What’s so amusing, if I might ask?”

Luke had popped up out of nowhere. He was looking sharp as ever, but no adoring fans tailed him today. Sylphie wasn’t with him, either.

“Nothing. I haven’t seen our resident Demon King for a while, so I was trying to summon him with my laughter,” I said.

“I see. In any case, Rudeus, could I trouble you to accompany me to the student council room?” Luke’s expression was troubled. Was something wrong?

“Sure, no problem.”

I bolted down the last of my food in a few seconds, rose to my feet, and followed Luke.

I couldn’t have told you why, but I got the impression Luke was angry about something. He didn’t say much on our way to the student council room, and his footsteps were louder than usual.

Ariel and Sylphie were waiting for us inside, as I’d expected. The princess’s expression was as impassive as

ever, but she looked a touch pale. Sylphie seemed kind of anxious, too.

The new term had only just begun, but apparently, we already had some sort of an incident on our hands.

"Hello, everyone. Is something wrong?"

"Yes, there is," said Ariel with a small sigh. She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I'm afraid we've noticed a number of first-year girls who live in the dormitories looking rather pale and distressed lately."

"Really?"

Now she definitely had my attention. Whatever the cause of this was, it might be having an effect on Norn.

"In the course of our investigation, we realized that most of the affected girls were quite pretty...and somewhat flat-chested as well."

Crap. Norn met both of those criteria, too. I was going to have to cooperate fully with this investigation of theirs. If I managed to save the day, maybe I'd even earn some gratitude from my sister.

"Today, we managed to get the details out of one victim. Apparently, Linia and Pursena were going around and...er..."

Hold on, Linia and Pursena? They said they weren't picking on the weak anymore, but...maybe they'd smelled some beef jerky in a new kid's pocket and chased them down or something. That was depressingly plausible.

"...demanding that they take off their underwear and hand it over."

Wait, what?

I had a very bad feeling about where this was going.

“Further investigation revealed that they were recently overheard saying, ‘I bet the boss will love those ones,’ in the dining hall not long thereafter.”

“...”

“From what we understand, they were stashing the underwear they stole in a certain bag.” Saying this, Ariel quietly glanced at the present I’d accepted a few hours earlier. Luke and Sylphie did the same, undoubtedly having received a description of what the bag looked like.

There was no doubt in my mind that the thing was packed full of plundered panties. Dirty, unwashed ones, in fact. That right there was a bag full of dreams.

Unbelievable. When had I ever asked Linia and Pursena for a present like this? And why was I getting excited just thinking about it? Damn, I really was a sad excuse for a human being.

“Rudeus, I do apologize, but—”

I decided to forestall the question. It was smarter to take the initiative in a situation like this. “Linia and Pursena gave me that bag this morning. They told me not to look inside until I was back at home, so I can’t be totally sure, but I have to assume it contains the objects you’re looking for.”

“I see. Just to be clear, did you order them to do this?”

“No, I didn’t.”

I was trying to keep my answers firm and concise. One wrong word could be lethal here, but I’d be all right as long as I kept it simple. This was just a misunderstanding, after all.

“You weren’t involved at any stage, then?”

“Of course not. I only just married Sylphie, remember? I’m not exactly sexually frustrated right now.”

Did she really think I was the type to carry out a plan this deranged right after I'd sent my own little sister into those dorms? I couldn't *prove* my innocence, though, so I wasn't sure how to defend myself. There had to be some way to make her understand...

"Very well then. I'll take you at your word." With another small sigh, Ariel abruptly cut off her interrogation.

Well, that was easier than expected.

"Thank you, Princess Ariel. I appreciate that."

"It's all right. I already thought it seemed strange you'd be behind this. Considering how thoroughly you seem to be enjoying your nights with Sylphie, I couldn't imagine why you'd want to harass any other girls."

Wait, did she know how we were spending our time together? Oh, god. Had Sylphie told her about those ridiculous lines I used on her the other night?

"Uh, Sylphie? Are you giving Princess Ariel reports on our private time?"

"Of course not!" protested Sylphie, shaking her head vigorously. "I-I wouldn't tell anyone about that! How did you even find out about this, Princess Ariel?!"

I did believe her. I knew the two of them were close friends, but I couldn't see a girl as shy as Sylphie talking about her sex life to anyone. Not that it would be that big a deal if she did...as long as she wasn't complaining about my performance or whatever...

"Well, I didn't," replied Ariel lightly. "I was just fishing for a reaction. I'm glad to hear you're enjoying each other's company, though."

Okay, well played.

Anyway...what were Pursena and Linia thinking? Gathering up an entire bag of freshly worn underwear had

to be their stupidest idea yet. Had I ever done or said anything to make them think I wanted... Wait a second. Didn't they say something about bringing me a bunch of panties as tribute a while ago?

Oh, crap, they did.

I'd assumed it was just a joke at the time, but maybe they'd been serious about it. Well, whatever. This still wasn't my fault, right? Yeah. Definitely not.

"I think this was a misguided attempt at doing me a kindness, so I'd appreciate it if you let me scold Linia and Pursena myself," I said. "Oh, and could you arrange to have the underwear returned to their owners? Just to be clear, I haven't even looked inside, let alone touched anything."

I handed the bag over to Ariel without hesitation.

Linia and Pursena might not have meant badly, but I'd have to be firm with them about this. The only panties I liked were *freshly* removed ones. It didn't do anything for me if I didn't get to see them coming off.

Wait, no. That's not the issue here.

"Very well, then."

Ariel peeked briefly inside the bag, then nodded once again. It seemed we'd managed to resolve the matter neatly.

"I must say, though," Ariel continued, shooting a glance over at Sylphie, "this is *quite* a lot of underwear. Aren't you a bit disappointed to lose such a treasure trove, Rudeus?"

"Not at all. I don't have an underwear fetish or anything."

"...I see. Well, my apologies for doubting you."

"That's quite all right. I'm glad we managed to clear up the misunderstanding."

Honestly, I was lucky it had played out like this. If I'd actually taken those panties home with me...well, I didn't know how I would have gotten rid of them. It was all too easy to picture myself freaking out for a while, then soaking them in booze to make an experimental "panty beer." Which would inevitably lead to Sylphie and Aisha finding them, and then I'd never hear the end of it.

"Well, that's a relief," said Sylphie softly. "I was worried I wasn't satisfying you, Rudy."

Ariel and Luke looked over at her with amused expressions on their faces. It took her a second to realize exactly what she'd just said, but then a bright red blush spread across her face.

And at that exact moment, the bell rang. Our lunch period was over.

"Oh, that's not good. We're going to be late for class."

"I'm very sorry for all the hassle Linia and Pursena caused you, Princess Ariel..."

"It's all right, Rudeus. These things happen."

Luke held the door open and invited me to step through it. Ariel and Sylphie followed, after which he came out himself and locked the door behind him.

"Let's get going, then."

Ariel fell in beside me as we walked. Sylphie and Luke followed slightly behind. Maybe I was supposed to be hanging back too? I wasn't too clear on the etiquette here.

"Oh..."

Before I could make up my mind, though, we turned the next corner and ran into Norn. She was loitering in the

hallway, looking around uncertainly. She pressed her lips together tightly at the sight of me.

"What's the matter, Norn?" I asked. "Class is about to start."

Instead of replying, Norn turned her face away from mine. By sheer coincidence, she met Princess Ariel's gaze instead.

"Hello, there. I'm Ariel, the president of the student council," Ariel said.

When Ariel favored her with a pleasant smile, Norn's face instantly went red. The princess tended to have that effect on people, I guess. "I'm, uh... Norn Greyrat."

"Nice to meet you, Norn. Is something wrong? Your next class will be beginning soon."

"Uhm, well... I'm not sure where the third practice room is..."

"Ah, I see."

So she'd been left behind when her class changed rooms, huh? Poor kid. It might sound insignificant, but things like that really hurt when they happened to you as a kid. It seemed my concerns about her turning into a loner might be justified.

"Luke, would you show her the way, please?" Ariel asked.

"Of course. This way, Norn. It's not far."

Gently placing a hand on Norn's back, Luke led her off down the hallway.

My sister's face was crimson with embarrassment. It was understandable, since Luke was a handsome guy, but I'd have to warn her about him later. The man was a born playboy.

Just before they turned the corner, Norn paused to look back at us. Her gaze darted between me, Ariel, and Sylphie for a moment. But then she turned around again and left. Without having said a single word to me.

It made me feel a little sad.

Once classes were over, I had Linia and Pursena meet me in the back of the main building. I had a great deal to say to them about the events that had taken place today.

The two of them showed up in high spirits. I think they liked the idea of a secret meeting behind the school. It was exactly the sort of place you'd have a dramatic scene in some romantic drama, after all.

"What's up, Boss? Why'd you have us come all the way back here?"

"Finally ready to admit you're in love with us? Well, you better run the plan by Fitz first. Don't want her gettin' mad at us."

I almost felt bad about spoiling their good mood.
Almost.

"We need to talk about that bag you gave me," I said. "I handed it over to Princess Ariel at lunch and asked her to give its contents back to their owners."

At first, their faces were blank with confusion. But a moment later, they started elbowing each other in the side and hissing at each other.

"I told you so! He didn't want 'em after all!"

"It's your fault, Linia. You said the boss loved panties."

"What? You thought so too!"

"I wanted us to test the waters first. By giving him yours."

“Why just me?! That wouldn’t be fair!”

“Yeah. That’s why we grabbed the dorm kids’ too.”

“That’s not what I mean! You coulda given him yours, too!”

“Nope. I’ve got big boobs, so he wouldn’t be interested.”

It was kind of entertaining to watch their pathetic attempts to blame each other for the situation, but also kind of irritating. Why did they think I only liked flat-chested girls, anyway?

“Okay, pipe down!” It felt like they could have gone on forever, so I clapped my hands sharply to interrupt. “Do you remember what I told you before, girls? I told you not to pick on anyone weaker than you. You *do* recall this, right?”

That got them trembling.

“W-we didn’t pick on anyone, Boss. Honest!” Linia whined.

“T-that’s right. We just asked ‘em real nicely,” added Pursena with a whimper.

Oh, come on. As if some poor little freshman girl was ever going to say no to a pair of terrifying bullies twice her size.

“Look, you’re beastfolk, aren’t you? I’d expect you to understand how humiliating it is to have your clothing torn off you.”

“B-But we gave them new underwear and everything! It was just a trade!”

“Oh, really? From the sound of things, a whole bunch of girls ended up pretty shaken afterwards.”

“Their new ones probably didn’t fit right, that’s all! We didn’t take any panties from the girls who said no, I swear!”

Hm? This sounded different from the way Ariel had described it. That brought me some relief. I'd feel terrible if they'd forcibly ripped anyone's clothes off. I might have been tempted to make them walk around naked in public for a while, just so they'd understand how humiliating it was.

"You said you wouldn't get mad, Boss! You promised!"

"It was just a misunderstanding, y'know? Cut us some slack here, man..."

The two of them were obviously more scared of being punished than anything else. At the end of the day, though, they'd gone to a lot of trouble for my sake. They'd noticed I was feeling down and tried to cheer me up. That was their only motivation here.

It was still a nice gesture, in that sense, even if I didn't like their present. I had sympathy for their victims, but they'd basically meant well. It wasn't like they'd deliberately set out to humiliate anyone, like the bullies who'd targeted me in my previous life.

Yeah. They were more like a pair of innocent kids who'd gone around collecting cicada shells, honestly. Would it really be fair for me to slap them with some massive punishment?

"All right, fine. But if I find out you actually traumatized anyone, I'm going to make you grovel naked in front of them and apologize."

"O-okay, Boss."

"We're sorry..."

I had a feeling Ariel would make sure their victims were taken care of. With that in mind, I couldn't find it in myself to get too angry at them, which actually surprised me a bit. Maybe I was biased because they were my friends?

"Tell me something, though. Why the heck did you decide to give me a bunch of underwear as a present, anyway?"

The two of them looked up at me in blank confusion, as if I'd asked the strangest question in the world.

"I mean, you *worship* panties, don'tcha?"

"Yeah. You got that one pair in your special altar and everything."

Ah, right. So this was ultimately my fault. I should never have allowed these two idiots to lay eyes upon my holy idol, not even for a second.

"You've got the wrong idea," I said. "I'm not worshiping the panties themselves. They just belonged to someone who I *do* worship. They're a holy relic, basically."

"Wait, really?"

"We totally thought you were in a panties cult or something."

I did have a certain fondness for panties, but I'd never taken things that far. "Well, now that that's cleared up... make sure you don't repeat this mistake, all right?"

"You got it, Boss!"

"We'll be good from now on."

Was there anything else that needed to be said? Hmm...oh, right.

"If you really feel the need to give me panties, I'd prefer ones you take off yourselves right in front of me."

"Huh?"

"Huh?!"

Whoops, maybe that part didn't need to be said.

Now I had the two of them smirking at me knowingly.

"I knew it! You do wanna mate with us, Boss!"

"Well, of course he does. Deep down, he's just another dude. We're irresistible."

Wow, this was *extremely* annoying. It also didn't make that much sense. Shouldn't they be grossed out or something, instead of teasing me like this? Did they have a crush on me?

Nah, that wasn't it. This was something different. I could tell they liked me, but it wasn't in the same way that Sylphie did. I couldn't put my finger on the exact difference, though. For now, I'd just think of it as a weird kind of friendship.

I'd said everything else I needed to, which brought this meeting to an end. My reputation was probably going to take a hit as a result of this incident, but I could live with that. I didn't care that much what people said about me behind my back, anyway.

As the three of us emerged from behind the building, we bumped into a group of first-year students. They were all carrying their school bags, so it seemed they were heading back to the dorms. The moment they spotted us, they all shifted over to the side of the path to get out of our way.

As they were moving, though, I spotted Norn at the very back of the group. She looked at me, and then at Linia and Pursena. Her expression shifted from surprise to one of outrage and disbelief, and then, as she passed us, she shot me a nasty glare.

Linia and Pursena turned around to watch her go, looking none too pleased themselves.

"What's that kid's problem? She's got a real attitude."

"No fuckin' kiddin'. We oughta teach her who's on top around here."

"Just so you guys know, that was my little sister," I said mildly.

Linia and Pursena cringed, their ears visibly drooping.
"Uh, well, good to see she's got some spirit!"

"Yeah. She's a real cutie, too."

Talk about transparent.

With a smile, I thumped the two of them on the shoulders. "Try to keep an eye out for her, okay?"

"You got it, Boss!"

"We'll play nice."

Still, this silent treatment from Norn was really starting to get to me. I wanted us to least get to where we could have a basic conversation...but as long as she was managing okay on her own, it didn't seem right for me to force the issue.

For a while, things were relatively uneventful. I wasn't getting any closer to Norn, but she was stopping by the house once every ten days like she'd promised.

I was a little surprised that she didn't disobey me more often, considering the fact that she obviously disliked me. But for the most part, she didn't push back at me directly... although she did grimace sometimes.

When you thought about it, though, I hadn't spent much time with either of my sisters after their infancy. Maybe it was stupid of me to expect they'd think of me as family right off the bat. Aisha's friendly attitude was probably the more unusual of the two. Just because you're related to someone doesn't mean you'll unconditionally enjoy each other's company. I knew that all too well. In fact, family members can often be the people we resent most bitterly—and most persistently.

I'd punched my father in front of Norn. Paul and I had made up quickly and put that incident behind us, but the memory probably still smoldered in my sister's heart. If she ever brought it up, I'd have to apologize sincerely. Even if it seemed like ancient history to me, the pain and anger might still be fresh for her.

There was no need to rush things, though. The two of us would probably be living close to each other for years, or even decades. If it took a year or two for her to warm up to me, I could live with that.

It wasn't like siblings had to be best friends with each other. We just needed to find a relationship that felt comfortable for both of us, and that might take some time.

Only a few days after I reached this conclusion, I got some alarming news.

Norn had shut herself in her room.

Chapter 4: A Brother's Feelings

I LEARNED ABOUT THE SITUATION as I headed to school with Sylphie one morning.

Linia and Pursena were waiting outside the gates for me. As soon as they saw us approaching, they ran over and explained that Norn had shut herself in her room the day before and was refusing to come out.

"I'm going to go take a look!" Sylphie was off and running toward the girls' dormitory pretty much instantly.

On the other hand, I was frozen in place. I should probably have been following my wife, but the news had thrown me into a state of panic. The word *shut-in* had some very heavy connotations for me, I guess.

"Aren't you going too, Boss?"

"You gonna just ignore this?"

I didn't know what to say.

What was I going to do? What was I *supposed* to do? My mind was blank. In my case, it had all been over the minute I locked myself into my room. I'd stayed a shut-in for the rest of my life.

Why did I never come back out? Because I thought the outside world was a dangerous place, full of people who wanted to do me harm. I thought I'd be bullied again if I went back to school. Yeah—it was the bullying that started it. I knew they'd make me miserable all over again if I ever tried to emerge from my isolation.

I had to address the *cause* of Norn's behavior if I wanted it to change. Before I tried to coax her out, I had to

figure out the reason she was hiding in her room.

A memory from my past flashed through my mind. I was in the cafeteria at my old school, standing patiently in line. But just as it was finally my turn, a bunch of scary-looking punks barged in ahead of me. Full of righteous anger, I stupidly decided to stand up for myself. I lectured them loudly enough for everyone to hear, even as they sneered at me and told me to fuck off.

I could see other students starting to glance over at us. Feeling increasingly proud of myself, I stubbornly pressed the issue, demanding an apology. Instead, they beat me viciously. By the time it was over, I thought they'd crippled me for life.

That one mistake turned my life into a living hell.

If there was any chance Norn was going through something similar right now, I needed to help her. I'd beat down the bullies who were harassing her until she felt safe again.

Their friends or relatives might come after me later, but I'd deal with them too if I had to. I didn't care if they were rich aristocrats, or even royalty. I'd fight them with everything I had. I'd make sure they lived to regret antagonizing me.

There was a possibility Norn had set off the initial conflict. But whatever they were doing to her in response had obviously crossed the line.

Norn was my sister. It didn't matter if she hated me and Aisha, or if she didn't want to live with us. She was still part of my family. And it's the big brother's job to protect his siblings, right?

A few minutes later, I was striding down the hall toward the first-year classrooms with Linia and Pursena following close behind me. I'd considered doing this by myself, but I didn't think my face was especially intimidating. At least with these two standing next to me, everyone should recognize that I meant business.

"Uh, Boss..."

"Don't, Linia. Can't you see how mad he is? It's kinda scary."

The two of them seemed a little dubious about this. That was understandable. I was dragging them into a seriously embarrassing situation. But right now, I wasn't about to let my sense of shame stop me. Right now, I was in full helicopter parent mode.

Before long, we reached Norn's primary classroom. Homeroom was already underway.

"Excuse me," I said, throwing open the door and stepping right inside.

"Uh, M-Mister Greyrat? We're in the middle of—"

"I'd like a moment of everyone's time, if you don't mind."



“But—”

“It won’t take long.”

Shouldering the professor out of the way, I took her place behind the podium.

Before getting underway, I looked around the classroom. Everyone was staring up at me in surprise. But somewhere in this crowd, there had to be a bully who was picking on my little sister.

Had they punched her? Kicked her? Maybe they’d only insulted her for now. Maybe they’d just *made fun* of a sad, lonely little girl who was isolated in an unfamiliar city.

“As I believe most of you know, one member of this class was absent yesterday.”

No one had anything to say to that.

“What you may not be aware of is that she’s my little sister.”

That got a reaction. I heard murmurs from all around the classroom.

“I haven’t heard the details from my sister yet, but there aren’t many reasons why a kid her age would stop coming to class. I think someone in this room is probably responsible.”

I scanned the room as I spoke, looking for a reaction. A number of students looked down at their desks when I made eye contact with them. Most of these were tougher-looking kids who were already starting to bend the dress code slightly. Did they have a guilty conscience, maybe?

Looking more closely, I realized that one of them was that delinquent I’d met some time earlier. I couldn’t remember his name off the top of my head. Could *he* have been the one?

Slow down. It's too early to start jumping to conclusions.

"I don't expect much of those responsible," I said. "Maybe they were just playing around, or trying to get to know my sister, and things took a weird turn. Maybe she provoked them somehow."

I was watching every face in the classroom very closely now.

Who was it? Who's bullying her? Is it that rich brat over there? Or maybe that sullen demon kid? No, it could just as easily be an ordinary girl. The average kids can be the nastiest bullies of all, sometimes.

"I'd very much appreciate it if anyone involved would step up and admit it. I'm not going to yell at you. I just want you to recognize what you did and apologize to my sister."

And after that, I'll chop you into mincemeat.

Some of the kids in this room were about as young as Norn, but the majority were older. Some were even in their late teens. There were probably at least a few who'd looked the other way. There was even a chance they'd *all* been in on it. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

For a few long moments, no one said a word. Everyone just stared at me, their eyes wide with surprise.

"U-Uhm..."

Finally, one girl in the group hesitantly raised her hand. It took some serious willpower to keep myself from firing off a Stone Cannon at her.

She was beastfolk, maybe thirteen years old, who looked a bit like a raccoon dog. She had a round face, timid eyes, and a bob haircut. Not the kind of kid you'd expect to be a bully, honestly. It was easier to imagine her *getting* bullied.

"I w-was actually talking to Norn the other day, and—"

"You accidentally said something mean to her?"

As long as it was just a few nasty words, maybe I'd take it easy on her.

"No, no! It's just, uhm... I've heard a lot of stories about you, Mr. Greyrat. But Norn's more of an ordinary girl, right? I just pointed out that you're pretty different from each other, and then she got really mad at me..."

That didn't make any sense. Why would Norn get mad about that? She didn't want to be like me. She didn't even like me.

"Oh..."

The professor standing off to the side of the room seemed to have remembered something. I turned my attention to her. At a glance, the woman looked like an ordinary middle-aged magician. It hadn't even occurred to me that a teacher might be the culprit, but adults can obviously be bullies too.

"Did something come to mind, Miss?"

"Well, I was giving Norn her homework back yesterday, and—"

"She couldn't finish all the assignments you'd dumped on her, so you made her stand naked in the faculty office for an hour?"

"What? N-No, no! She didn't do too well on the assignment, so I told her to learn from your example and try a little harder next time."

"..."

"I thought she was going to cry for a moment, but then she nodded and said she'd do her best."

Wait, what? She nearly cried?

"Oh, wait, that reminds me..."

All of a sudden, there were multiple people chiming in from all around the classroom. And all of them had similar stories to share.

After leaving the classroom behind, the three of us headed over to the dining hall. At this time of the day, it was totally deserted.

I took a seat at random and flopped forward onto the table. This one really hurt.

Long story short, it all came back to me. Every time Norn had lost her cool, it had been because of someone mentioning my name or comparing her to me.

Most of the students in her class had known that we were siblings. That wasn't too strange, in and of itself. We had the same parents, and we looked alike. But whenever someone mentioned this, Norn reacted badly. She hated being compared to me, but she got just as upset when someone referenced me as a way of complimenting her.

Her classmates weren't to blame for any of this. None of them were deliberately trying to upset her. Some of them were even trying to be nice by telling her she was nothing like her scary bully of a brother.

The real issue was that nearly everyone in this school knew me. And so, even without really meaning to, they tended to bring me up when they were around her. That was always going to be rough for Norn. Back in her old school, she'd been constantly compared to Aisha, and never in a good way. She was the less talented sister, and they rubbed her nose in it every single day.

She was finally in a new school, living on her own, without Aisha hanging over her like a shadow. But before

she had a chance to catch her breath, everyone started comparing her to me. No matter where she went, she was forced to face the fact that she was the least talented member of her family.

That had to be rough in itself. And then, just to top it all off, there'd been that incident with the panties.

No one had actually been traumatized by that whole mess, fortunately. Ariel did a great job following up with the victims, and by now, most of them could look back on it and laugh. From the sound of things, Linia hadn't forced the girls to strip against their will but rather just pestered them to trade their underwear. It seemed someone had seen this happening from a distance and given the student council an exaggerated version of events.

Still, I could only imagine how Norn had felt when she heard about it. It's hard enough to feel inferior to your brother, but feeling inferior to your *total pervert* of a brother had to be ten times worse.

"Sigh..."

What the hell was the matter with me, anyway? I'd jumped to conclusions and barged into her classroom like an idiot. I wasn't a helicopter parent—I was a helicopter dumbass.

"Sorry about dragging you into that, guys," I mumbled, looking over at my faithful subordinates. "I guess I was being kind of stupid."

"That ain't true. It's never stupid to try and help your family."

"She's right, Boss."

"If the kid stays in that room too long, her brain's gonna melt into mush."

"Too true, mew."

“She might even become as stupid as Linia.”

“Yeah, she might—mrrrow!!”

I couldn’t even muster up a smile as Linia and Pursena went about their usual comedy routine. I knew how tricky situations like this could be. People don’t just stop going outside because it’s fun, you know? There’s always a reason why they can’t bring themselves to leave, and dragging them out of their room by force doesn’t change that. In fact, it often makes the problem worse.

That said, this wasn’t the sort of thing we could just ignore. If Norn stayed in there for too long, she’d end up regretting it. Even a wasted month or two can have serious consequences.

I knew all this from bitter experience. But it wasn’t something you could just *explain* to a kid who was right there in the middle of it.

Eventually, even the stubbornest cases start to wish they could go back and do things differently. But it takes a long time to get to that point. Real regret doesn’t hit you until a year—or two, or even ten—slips by. And by that point, it’s too late to undo any of the choices you made.

It’s part of why so many parents push their kids so hard, I guess. Everyone has regrets. Sometimes, you take those regrets out on others.

“Tell me something, you two. Let’s say you’re less talented than your siblings, and people won’t stop reminding you of that fact. What’s the best thing you can do about it?”

Linia and Pursena looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

“I dunno, Boss. The two of us are pretty talented, ya know?”

"Yep. We're not too shabby at anything."

Wait, I thought you two got shipped out here because you were too dumb and lazy to lead your tribe. Right? Like, they wanted to whip you into shape before they gave you any power?

Well, whatever. Their total lack of self-awareness clearly wasn't hurting them. That approach wasn't going to work for Norn, though. She was a sensitive little girl, not a fur-brained narcissist.

"Oh, I do know someone *like* that, though!" said Linia proudly. "Aunt Ghislaine! She used to be a thug who went around startin' fights all the time. But then she started training, and she ended up becoming a Sword King!"

"Hmm. Okay, that's not a bad example..."

Ghislaine was an exceptional case, but there was definitely a chance that Norn had some unexpected talent we hadn't discovered yet. There was no reason for her to compete with me or Aisha at the things that we were good at. If she didn't want to be compared to us, she could just do something neither of us had even tried. I wasn't sure exactly what that something could be, but the world was a big place. Surely, she could find a field that interested her, outside the realm of magic or swordplay.

There was a risk she wouldn't be particularly talented at whatever she decided to do with her life. It had happened to Zanoba, after all. But despite his lack of talent as an artisan, the prince still seemed to be enjoying life. He got to make his own figures, collect them, and appreciate them. That was enough to make him happy, and that was all that really mattered.

It would probably be hard to convince Norn of this, though. None of these arguments would have worked on *me* back in the day.

"But how am I supposed to talk to her about all of this?"

"Don't overthink it, Boss. Barge right in there and give it to her straight!"

"Yep. Just tell her to get her butt back in class."

They sure made it sound simple...but maybe I was spending too much time trying to think through all these details. Norn was only ten years old, after all. Maybe she was just sulking.

I mean, this was only her second day in her room, right? It was way too early to even call her a shut-in at this point. Spending a couple days alone when you're feeling down isn't anything that unusual.

That said, she was obviously struggling right now. I'd been telling myself she probably just needed space, but was that actually true? Maybe I'd just been avoiding the issue.

As her big brother, I could have at least *tried* to actively support Norn and help her adjust. The hands-off approach might be easier, but that didn't mean it was the better choice. It might be a different story if we were talking about a high school-aged kid, or even a junior high schooler, but Norn was only ten. Giving her more attention than she wanted was probably the right call.

Before I knew it, I'd settled on a plan of action.

"All right then. I'll go talk to her."

"That's the spirit, Boss!"

"Yeah. Go give her a little slap upside the head."

Of course, I was the direct cause of Norn's problems, so it seemed very possible that she wouldn't listen to a word I had to say. But I wasn't going to drive myself crazy thinking about that. First things first: I had to go see her and hear what she had to say.

"Oh. I'm not sure how I'm going to get to her, though..."

Norn's room was in the girls' dormitory. I could walk past it safely these days, but that didn't mean they were going to let me wander inside.

"You just sneak your way in, obviously."

"Time fer a covert operation, Boss. Leave the plannin' to us!"

The "covert operation" didn't prove too difficult, thankfully. I had lots of friends on the inside; Sylphie and Ariel were in that dorm too. When I explained the situation to the princess, she immediately agreed to help me out. Of course, Goliade and the other members of her self-defense squad weren't going to be so easily convinced, so this still needed to be a secret visit.

Linia, Pursena, and Sylphie would be handling the actual operational support. Sylphie was eager to help, but she seemed a little downcast about the situation.

"I'm sorry, Rudy. I promised you I'd keep an eye out for Norn, but she doesn't even want to talk to me..."

"It's not your fault, Sylphie. I'm the only one to blame here."

I explained what I'd learned about the situation, including the fact that Norn's depression had a lot to do with me.

Sylphie listened quietly, but she ultimately frowned and shook her head. "None of that sounds like *your* fault, Rudy."

"What? But I...uh..."

Hm. Maybe I hadn't really done anything that wrong, come to think of it. Not that I'd handled the situation very well either.

It didn't matter either way. I still needed to fix this.

That evening, I waited until dinner time, then headed for the dorm.

The majority of the residents were off at the dining hall at the moment. Word had gotten around that Ariel was going to be giving an impromptu speech there, and she always drew a big crowd.

That didn't mean the dorms would be totally deserted, though. You couldn't fit the whole student body in the dining hall even if you tried. Still, I understood that the members of the self-defense squad were being encouraged to attend.

I slipped along the side of the building as furtively as possible, looking for a specific room. After a few moments, I spotted it—a window with a single flower placed up against the windowsill.

I grabbed a small pebble and tossed it up at the window. A moment later, it slid open. After that, it was just a matter of lifting myself up off the ground with the spell Earth Lance and clambering inside.

"...Hm."

I found myself inside a dark room with a strong animal funk. I didn't mind the scent that much. Maybe it was because the beasts in question were also young women. Animals tend to be more tolerant of the odors emitted by potential mates, right?

“Thanks for the help.”

“You betcha, Boss.”

Linia had been waiting in here for me for a while. Her cat-like eyes glinted slightly in the darkness.

My eyes were starting to adjust, so I took a look around the place. The layout was perfectly typical. You had your two-tier bunk bed, a couple of desks and chairs, and a shared closet.

It was a little hard to tell, but the room looked like a bit of a mess.

“Don’t look around too much, Boss. It’s embarrassing, ya know?”

“Right. Sorry.”

I took a few cautious steps forward and groped around, looking for the doorknob. Instead, my hand closed around something oddly soft.

“Ooh. That’s one of Pursena’s bras.”

“...”

I wasn’t sure what her cup size was, but from the feel of things, it had to be impressive.

“Nyheh. Feel free to take that one home with you, Boss.”

“I don’t think you get to decide that.”

I tossed aside the brassiere with a sigh. Normally, I might have taken this opportunity to press it to my mouth and take a few deep breaths, but there was no time to waste at the moment.

Linia slipped past me and knocked on her door from the inside. A few seconds later, another knock answered from the outside.

“Looks like we’re good.”

The two of us swung open the door, and I quickly slid into the laundry cart that was waiting right in front of it, burrowing underneath a pile of sheets.

From the smell alone, I could tell these had come from Sylphie’s bed. There were blankets and shirts in there as well to provide a little more volume, and all of them smelled like her. I couldn’t work up the energy to get aroused, though.

Norn was the only thing on my mind right now.

My little sister was suffering. She was all alone in that room, totally isolated, hiding from the world. And I had to help her. I was her brother, after all.

“Okay. Let’s roll.”

As the cart rattled along down the hallways, I turned my thoughts to the problem at hand.

If this was just a temper tantrum, that was one thing. But what if it was something more serious? Would I be of any use here? Until the day my brothers kicked me out into the street, I’d never managed to leave my house. If there were any argument that could have coaxed me out, I didn’t know it.

“We’re here, Boss.”

The cart reached its destination before I could reach any real conclusions.

We were outside Norn’s room.

I pushed open the door as quietly as I could and stepped inside.

The room was totally dark, so I paused to light one of the candles in the corner.

In its faint light, I could see Norn sitting on her bed, holding her knees to the chest. Her eyes were open, and she was staring right at me.

“...”

I approached her slowly and took a seat in the closest chair.

What were you supposed to say at times like this, anyway? What would I have wanted someone to say to me? I couldn’t remember. All the words I’d rehearsed beforehand evaporated from my mind.

I could remember the things I used to *hate* hearing, at least. Mainly the cheap clichés. If nothing else, I wasn’t going to fall into the “my way or the highway” pattern. No “you’re going back to school right now.” No “I’m paying your tuition for a reason, young lady.” And no “stop making such a nuisance of yourself.”

Lines like that would only backfire on me.

Maybe Linia and Pursena were right, in a sense—a slap upside the head *might* be simplest. Norn was only ten years old, so it might be enough to make her do what I wanted. But that would be the opposite of a long-term solution. Another crisis would pop up soon enough, and she’d grow steadily more defiant.

And apart from anything else, it was my fault she was hiding in here. What right did I have to lecture her, let alone hit her? If anything, I owed her an apology.

Not that saying sorry was going to change anything. The rumors about me weren’t going to go away, and Norn was going to keep getting compared to me.

“Norn, I—”

“Uhm, Rudeus—”

We’d both spoken up at the exact same time.

I cut myself off mid-sentence so Norn could continue. But she'd fallen silent as well. It was a crappy feeling. I sort of felt like I'd missed my only chance.

I had to believe that wasn't really the case, though. And so I forced myself to start the conversation.

"I'm sorry, Norn. It hasn't been easy for you here, has it?"

I paused for a moment, but she didn't say anything in response.

"You finally got into a new school, but now everyone's pestering you about me. I'm not even sure what to say, honestly..." I continued.

Norn didn't respond.

"I guess I don't really...even understand you that well..."

Still no response. And despite all the thinking I'd done on my way over here, I found myself at a loss for words. I didn't know *anything* about her. I'd kept my distance from her, telling myself not to pry. I hadn't even tried to get to know her.

"...I know this must be hard for you, but I'm not sure what to do," I tried again.

Norn was still silent. I couldn't begin to tell what she was thinking. I didn't even know if she was listening to me.

Was this a lost cause after all? Should I just back down and wait for Paul to get here? Maybe I should step back and seek help from the people I knew. Maybe Nanahoshi could offer some insight on what a younger girl might be thinking. Maybe Elinalise could figure out some clever way to coax her out. There was no reason I had to try and solve this by myself, right?

"...Oh."

Suddenly, I found myself remembering something I hadn't thought about in a long time.

When I first shut myself away from the world, one of my brothers used to come see me in my room. He'd always look me right in the eye and hit me with all sorts of reasonable-sounding arguments.

"Life always has its ups and downs, you know? But there are people out there who have it worse than you. Things might be tough right now, but if you just run away from all your problems, you'll keep running forever. That's much worse in the long run. You don't have to go back to school right away, but why don't you at least come out and have lunch with me?"

In my mind, I answered those words by spitting in his face. And in reality, I ignored him.

Even so, he would stay in there for some time after delivering his speeches. He'd watch me closely, looking like he had something more to say. But I kept on ignoring him, confident that he couldn't possibly understand my feelings.

Maybe *this* was how he'd felt back then.

We used to sit like that for hours sometimes in total silence before he'd finally get up and leave. After a while, he stopped coming. I can only guess what he was thinking. Although he didn't show up anymore, a bunch of other people started to visit me instead. Maybe he'd arranged that.

In the end, I paid no attention to anything those people said either.

This might just be a crucial turning point. If I backed off now, I had a terrible feeling that Norn might stay in this room forever.

I couldn't just turn and run. Not this time.

For a long moment, I studied my sister quietly in the darkness.

Chapter 5: **Norn Greyrat**

I'M NOT SURE when I started to be afraid of my brother. But it wasn't that way from the start.

The first time I met Rudeus was the day he punched my dad in the face.

I loved my dad. He had some huge flaws, but I knew he cared about me very much, and he always put me first. More importantly, I was less than five years old at the time. Most kids love their parents unconditionally at that age.

I adored my dad. And Rudeus showed up out of nowhere and started hitting him.

I didn't really understand the conversation that led up to it. At this point, years after the fact, I can recognize that my dad actually provoked the fight. Rudeus had just completed a long, difficult journey through dangerous country, and dad mocked him harshly. But at the time, all I saw was my brother sitting on top of my dad and punching him repeatedly. And all I could think was *He's going to kill him*. It was the only thing that mattered to me in that moment.

Naturally, I wasn't about to accept that a monster like that was part of my family.

I wasn't scared of Rudeus back then. I just hated him.

I kept hating him for a long time after that. It didn't help that everyone felt the need to compliment him. It wasn't just my father—when I met my sister and the family maid later, they also talked about him in glowing tones. But the more they praised him, the more stubbornly I despised him.

I hated my sister almost as much as I hated Rudeus. At the school we went to together, Aisha insisted on constantly competing with me. She challenged me in the classroom and on the field we used to exercise, and she *always* beat me soundly. She rubbed my nose in my failures.

With her around, I spend every single day feeling like a loser. I didn't think I could ever be friends with her.

My grandmother was aware of this state of affairs, and she didn't like it one bit. She had nothing but contempt for Aisha, who she called "illegitimate." But she also had high hopes of me...or at least high expectations. She said I was a "lady of the Latria family." Apparently, that meant I needed to be "competent" at the very least.

I was forced to attend etiquette classes and lessons to prepare for specific ceremonies. None of it came naturally to me; I messed up repeatedly and was scolded on a daily basis. Whenever I embarrassed myself, my grandmother would mutter, "I suppose that adventuring business must pollute the *blood*, as well as the spirit."

I knew she was insulting both my mom and my dad with those words. My dad worked hard for me, and that was all she had to say about him. It didn't take long for me to start hating her as well.

And so when my brother's teacher showed up and told us where my mother was, I decided to follow my dad on his journey instead of staying with my grandmother.

Dad was hesitant. He thought it would be safer for me to stay behind. My mother came from Millis aristocracy, and my father from an Asuran noble house. I had a good lineage, at least in those terms. Because of that, my grandfather was willing to take me into his household on a permanent basis.

But I hated that idea, so I begged my dad to take me with him. I cried and pleaded. And eventually, I got to come

along.

And yet...in the end, my dad sent me off to live with Rudeus.

He said things would be too dangerous from now on. He said Rudeus was living up north, so I should go stay there and wait for him. He said he'd follow me up there once he found my mom.

I cried. I refused. I pleaded with him to take me along. The last thing I wanted was to be separated from him now, after we'd come so far together. If Ruijerd hadn't shown up when he did, I might have worn my dad down eventually. And then I would probably have gotten sick or injured on that harsh journey across the Begaritt Continent. I would probably have caused him all sorts of trouble.

Thanks to Ruijerd, it didn't come to that.

I remembered him so clearly. On the day I met my brother, Ruijerd had reached out and caught me when I tripped in the street. He'd patted my head and given me an apple. I didn't know his name at the time. At some point, I'd learned he was my brother's bodyguard, but I never got the chance to ask his name.

He was just as kind the second time we met. He patted me on the head again and gently persuaded me to do the right thing.

And so I ended up heading north toward my brother's new home.

Aisha was full of energy and enthusiasm from the moment we got on the road. She dropped the good girl act she put on around Dad and Lilia, started acting like the leader of our expedition, and came up with all sorts of crazy plans.

I thought she was being stupid. It seemed ridiculous for her to try to take charge when we had two grown-ups traveling with us. But for some reason, Ruijerd and Ginger took her seriously and even agreed to most of her ideas.

It didn't seem fair at all. Her opinions always seemed to carry more weight. Anything I said basically got ignored.

The main reason I could put up with it was Ruijerd. He was considerate of my feelings, at least. He always made the time to comfort me and listen to my complaints.

But even he spent lots of time complimenting my brother.

He called Rudeus a remarkable man. He told me how much he looked forward to seeing him. He even smiled slightly when he spoke about him, and he almost never smiled. The Rudeus I knew and the Rudeus he talked about seemed to be entirely different people.

Maybe that was when I started to be afraid of my brother.

Rudeus was a powerful magician. He was worthy of respect. Everyone said so. But the Rudeus I knew was the man who'd thrown my dad to the floor and beaten him. He was a violent person. If I upset him, there was no guarantee he wouldn't hit me the way he hit my dad.

I was scared to meet him, and the idea of living with him for *months* was terrifying. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night, trembling. Sometimes I couldn't fall asleep at all. Ruijerd was always there to comfort me, at least. He'd put me on his lap, and we'd look up at the stars together as he told me stories of his past. Most of them were sad, but for some reason, they always helped me fall asleep.

When I met Rudeus again for the first time in years, he was drunk and clinging to a woman.

Apparently, she was some childhood friend of his from Buena Village, and they'd gotten married recently. I didn't remember her at all. I had a vague memory of some older kid hanging around Aisha and Lilia, but I didn't remember her being anything like this Sylphie person. She must have changed a lot over the years.

Rudeus was clearly enjoying his life here to the fullest.

It made me angry to see that. My dad hadn't wasted any time playing around with women for years and years. He said he was putting that on hold until he found my mom. He hadn't even touched Lilia, let alone any of the other women in his life.

My brother's first priority, on the other hand, was his own happiness. That made me mad.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything, though. I was afraid of him. I was afraid he might start hitting me if I made him angry.

Would Ruijerd step in to defend me if it came to that? It was hard to say. He seemed really happy to see Rudeus again. Maybe he wouldn't take my side. Maybe he'd say I was being rude or selfish.

I couldn't say anything that first night. And then, the very next day, Ruijerd left for good. I'd assumed he would be staying with us for a while longer. I didn't want him to go. But he left anyway.

I was even more afraid than before. The only people left in the house were Rudeus, his wife, and Aisha. My little sister was overjoyed about being with Rudeus again. Sylphie seemed like a nice enough person, but she wasn't on my side. I didn't have *anyone* on my side.

And I was stuck here until my dad got back. I'd have to live in fear for months and months.

Rudeus would probably be nice to Aisha but strict with me. He'd praise my sister and tell me to try harder.

Aisha always said it was my fault I couldn't do anything right. She said I didn't put in the effort. But there were things I just couldn't do, no matter how hard I tried. Even when I wanted to improve, even when I put in lots of practice, I still couldn't compare to her. So what was I supposed to do?

For now, all I could do was stay out of the way. I hid myself away, hoping no one would get mad at me. Hoping no one would tell me how inferior I was.

The city outside was covered in snow. I was afraid of getting tossed out into the cold on my own.

Rudeus decided I had to start attending school.

This "university" sounded pretty different from the school I'd attended back in Millishion. I could enroll as a first-year, but that didn't mean all my classmates would be my age. There were all sorts of people studying there, and most of them were older than me.

To be honest, I didn't want to go. I knew I'd just end up being compared to Aisha again. As it turned out, though, my sister had no intention of going to school ever again. That was good news for me, at least. Without her around, maybe I could do a little better.

My brother gave Aisha a condition, though. She had to take the University's entrance exam. This was a test everyone had to take before they entered the school—which meant I'd be taking it too.

That discouraged me deeply. There was no way I could pass a test without even studying for it. But when I told Rudeus that, he said he could just *buy* me a spot at the University. It was such a thoughtless, rude thing to say that I got angry, despite myself. Then Aisha got mad at me for being mad, and it turned into a fight.

“Cut it out, you two.”

My brother’s cold tone set off a twinge of fear inside me.

I thought he was going to punch me for a second. I was so scared I cried a little.

Was I going to have to keep living like this, constantly flinching in fear?

On the day of the exam, Rudeus told me about the dorms. Apparently, the University of Magic let its students live in big buildings on the campus, to help them grow more independent. It sounded like the solution to all my problems.

I had no doubt my sister would pass the exam, which meant she wouldn’t have to go to school. So if I moved into the dorms, I wouldn’t have to see her or Rudeus anymore. No one would compare me to anybody. I could just be myself and live my own life.

The more I thought about, the more perfect it sounded.

A few days later, we got the results from the test, and my brother asked me what I wanted to do now. Hesitantly, I admitted that I wanted to live in the dorms.

I was afraid he might get angry. My dad had wanted me to stay with Rudeus, and he’d probably told Rudeus to keep an eye on me in his letter. I thought my brother might get mad at me. Maybe even hit me for being so selfish.

But to my surprise, Rudeus agreed immediately.

It was Aisha who got angry. She thought it was unfair that I was getting what I wanted. Up until now, she'd always gotten better treatment than me. I guess she didn't like the fact that Rudeus had tested her but not me.

Still, why *had* my brother agreed to my request? I didn't know. I didn't understand him at all. Looking back, I realized that he hadn't gotten upset with me at all since I arrived here, except for that one time I fought with Aisha.

...Maybe he just wasn't interested in me at all.

Maybe he thought taking care of me was nothing more than a nuisance, and he saw this as a golden opportunity to kick me out. For all I knew, he'd been planning to dump me in the dorms, regardless.

That would be convenient, as far as I was concerned. But for some reason, the thought made me feel a little sad.

Everything about living in the dorms was new to me. It was genuinely exciting.

For the first time in my life, I had a roommate. I was going to be living with an older girl named Marissa. She was a demon.

My grandmother always said demons were evil creatures—monsters to be driven away or destroyed. If I hadn't met Ruijerd, I probably would have kept on believing that. But I *had* met Ruijerd, so I introduced myself politely to Marissa, and she welcomed me warmly in return. I needed a lot of help, since I was starting in the middle of the school term, and Marissa was really there for me. She taught me how the meals worked here, where the bathrooms were, and the rules of the dorm.

As she was showing me around the place, a scary-looking demon girl from the "self-defense squad" spotted us

and introduced herself to me. "We're all one big family here," she said, "so we've got to look out for each other."

I was a little intimidated by her, but Marissa told me she was a good-hearted person who took her responsibilities seriously.

All in all, I was very much looking forward to my new life here. It was annoying that I had to go back to my brother's house once every ten days, but he didn't ask me too many specific questions, so it wasn't that big a deal.

And so I began my new life as a boarding school student.

Immediately, I realized that the classes here are very difficult. I think it was partially because the teachers explained everything so differently, compared to the ones back in Millis. It might have been different if I'd been there for all the lessons from the beginning, but I was jumping in midway. There were lots of lectures I just couldn't follow.

Back in Millis, we'd had a lot of classes about religion, but that wasn't even a subject here. Instead, we had practical lessons in magic. I wasn't too good at those either. The professors didn't bother explaining the basics.

It was all a little discouraging. But if my grades were too terrible, I might end up getting dragged back to my brother's house. I tried to study in my dorm room, but it wasn't helping. And then, just as I was reaching the end of my rope, Marissa was nice enough to start tutoring me. With her patient help, I finally managed to get my head around some of the concepts I was supposed to be learning in class.

Aisha would probably have understood all of this instantly. Sometimes I hated myself for being so stupid.

The campus was very large, and I got lost on a regular basis.

The practical lessons in magic and fitness were particularly bad. They held those in a bunch of different rooms that I could never remember how to find. Every time I got lost, I'd have to ask some older student for directions or wait until someone from my class came to find me.

Once, I even ran into Rudeus while I was lost. For some reason, he was walking with the most important student in the entire school. It was incredibly embarrassing.

Everyone in the University was afraid of my brother.

From the sound of things, he was the boss of a small gang of six thugs that went around doing anything they wanted. Two of those people lived in my dorm. They were tall, scary-looking girls who strutted around like they owned the place. Marissa had warned me not to get in their way if I could help it.

Rumor had it that Rudeus had ordered those two to collect a pair of panties from every cute girl in the school.

Did my brother's wife know about that? Probably not. I had no idea what he was planning to do with all that underwear in the first place, but it made me really mad. My dad was off risking his life to save my mom, and my brother was just playing around like an idiot. My opinion of him was sinking steadily lower.

But despite his bizarre actions, my brother's reputation was strangely positive. People said he never picked on ordinary students. Although he did as he pleased, he didn't hurt anybody or harass them. In fact, he'd supposedly told all the tough kids to stop picking on anyone weaker than them. One of the scarier kids in my class even *bragged* about having spoken to Rudeus once.

Rudeus was better at magic than anyone else in the University, and apparently, he was a good teacher too. People said he was tutoring a girl even younger than me.

My classmates, my teachers, and even Marissa told me I should try to follow in his footsteps. They wanted me to be like him. To be like...the brother I feared, and hated, and didn't understand at all.

I didn't want to be like him.

But more than anything, it hurt to know that I couldn't compare to him. He was better than me at everything, just like Aisha.

No matter how hard I tried, I'd never be a match for him.

I hated Rudeus. I thought he was a terrible person.

But the fact was: I couldn't even begin to compete with him.

One day, I returned to my dorm room and flopped straight down on my bed.

A great big jumble of emotions had been growing inside me for weeks now. Bitterness, sadness, self-pity, anger, and who knew what else.

I couldn't hold them back anymore. I couldn't stop myself from breaking down.

Marissa came back to the room a little later. She saw me crying into my pillow and gently asked me what was wrong, but I just said, "It's nothing," and pulled my blanket over my head.

What was I supposed to do now?

Was I wrong about Rudeus? Or was it everybody else?

...It was probably me. He probably wasn't as bad a person as I thought he was.

I was very young on the day I saw Rudeus punch my dad. After it happened, my dad tried to explain that he'd been going through a lot, and I could never understand what that was supposed to mean. But now, after all this time, it finally made some sense to me. I was "going through a lot" myself at the moment, after all.

If I worked hard, turned things around, and managed to cheer up, it would really suck to have someone say, "Wow, look at you. Must be nice to have such a carefree life." I'd probably want to punch them, in fact. Even if it was my own dad.

Deep down, Rudeus and I were probably similar people. He wasn't some inhuman monster, after all.

But that said...how was I supposed to go talk things through with him now? What would he even want from me? How had he managed to make up with Dad, anyway?

I thought about it, and I thought some more. Nothing came to mind, but eventually my belly began to hurt. My stomach cramped up painfully, and I started to feel nauseated. So I burrowed deeper into my bed and did nothing.

I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even bring myself to go face my brother.

At times like these, Dad was always there for me. When something bad happened and I curled up in bed, he'd come in and gently rub my back for a while. And after we were separated, Ruijerd took his place. He'd put me on his lap and pat my head and tell me stories.

I didn't have anyone like that here. Marissa was nice to me, but she wasn't on my side. All she could suggest was that I should talk to my brother, or try going back to class.

I knew all that already. The problem was that my body didn't want to move.

How much time had passed since I curled up in my bed?

I kept thinking in circles for what felt like many hours, then falling asleep out of exhaustion. I'd repeated that cycle a couple times, so it might have been a few days by now.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed. And for some reason, Rudeus was right in front of me. He was sitting backward on a chair and staring at me.

"Norn, I—"

"Uhm, Rudeus—"

It felt like the first time I'd spoken my brother's name out loud.

The two of us had broken the silence at the exact same time. Apparently, I wasn't hallucinating, then. How had he gotten into the girls' dorm?

I was so confused I didn't know what to say. My brother was quiet too. For a while, we just stared at each other.

This had to be the first time I'd looked this closely at Rudeus' face. He looked a little anxious. His features reminded me a little of my dad, which was kind of reassuring. But of course they'd look alike.

"I'm sorry, Norn. It hasn't been easy for you here, has it?" Rudeus said, his voice hesitant. "I guess I don't really... even understand you that well... I know this must be hard for you, but I'm not sure what to do."

Was it just me, or was he *really* nervous? That reminded me of my dad too.

“...”

My brother fell silent again. He just sat there quietly, not moving an inch.

He was watching me anxiously, but he didn't budge from that chair. My dad probably would have wrapped his arms around me by now, and Ruijerd would have patted me on the head. But my brother didn't even approach me.

“Oh.”

Suddenly, I understood why.

He *couldn't* approach me. He was too scared I might reject him.

The instant that thought occurred to me, I felt all my negative emotions begin to melt away. I didn't hate Rudeus anymore. I couldn't find him scary either. He was too much like my dad.

He was never going to hit me, no matter what. And he probably wasn't ever going to hit my dad again either.

“Sniff...”

I needed to forgive him.

“Hic!”

There were tears rolling down my cheeks now. My throat was quivering.

After a moment, I started to sob.

“I'm sorry, Rudeus! I'm sorry...”

Slowly, cautiously, my brother stood up and sat down next to me. He gently put his hand on my head, and then he

hugged me to his chest. His hand was warm, and his chest was firm.

He smelled a little bit like my dad too.

I spent the rest of the night crying in his arms.

Rudeus

IN THE END, I didn't do much of anything.

Norn didn't tell me what was going on. She never told me what she was upset about, or what she'd been feeling. She just cried for a long time.

And then, when it was finally over, she looked up and mumbled, "I'll be okay now."

That was it.

But for some reason, she really *did* look okay for once. She even managed to look me right in the eye.

I felt enormously relieved. Something told me she was going to be all right now.

And so, I left the rest to Sylphie and slipped out of my sister's room.

Norn grew noticeably more cheerful after that incident.

The changes weren't exactly dramatic. She just started saying hello to me when we passed each other in the hall. We still didn't talk that much, and she didn't start hanging all over me like her sister. She was probably still getting compared to me in her classes, but I guess it didn't bother her as much anymore.

I still didn't understand what she was feeling. I hadn't done anything meaningful at all. It made me feel a little pathetic. I knew how it felt to be looked down on, and I knew how it felt to isolate yourself in your room. But I'd still failed to come up with anything useful to say.

At the end of the day, I guess Norn had worked it out herself. She'd processed her feelings and pulled herself over the obstacle in her path.

That was a seriously impressive accomplishment.

Paul and Aisha seemed to think Norn was just a clumsy, timid kid without any special talents. But I had a very different opinion of her now. She'd managed to climb up out of a hole I'd spent an entire lifetime trapped in.

If I'd been half as strong as her, maybe my first life wouldn't have turned out so miserably. Maybe I wouldn't have wound up getting punched in the face by my kind-hearted brother.

It was impossible to know for sure, of course. My situation was different from Norn's. Even if I'd worked out my feelings, I might never have left my room. Maybe I *needed* to be reborn and meet Roxy for that to be possible.

Either way, I couldn't change the past. The relationships I'd broken could never be repaired. And I'd never know for sure what was going through my brother's head back then.

Still, I kind of felt...like something that was stuck between my teeth for a very long time had just worked its way free. If Nanahoshi managed to return to our old world someday, I'd have to ask her to take a message to my brother.

"Thanks for trying to get through to me back then. And I'm sorry."

Chapter 6: Life with the Greyrat Sisters

ANOTHER MONTH had passed, and the weather was finally warming up. This would be the second summer I'd spent in Ranoa.

Even at this time of year, it wasn't exactly hot in this region. But people were starting to dress a little more lightly. The students at school switched to short-sleeved uniforms, which I didn't mind one bit, and Aisha changed up her maid uniform as well. Sylphie even started wearing sleeveless shirts around the house. I didn't remember her owning anything like that before, but I guess she'd purchased a few more outfits after moving in with me.

I certainly wasn't going to complain about her choosing to show some skin. The sight of those slender white shoulders made it a little harder to keep my hands to myself, though. Summer was a nice season, all right. And up here, you didn't have any nasty multi-legged visitors scuttling into your house to nibble at your food either.

The changing seasons reminded me that I hadn't seen Badigadi around for some time now. Maybe he'd wandered off somewhere and forgotten to tell anyone.

A few other things had changed over the course of this month.

First of all, it seemed Norn had made a few friends. I'd noticed her moving around in a group of three girls and two boys, including some students from different classes. These were probably Norn's first real friends. I wanted to introduce myself to them, so I'd asked her to bring them over to our

house sometime, but she'd flatly rejected the idea. I guess she found the idea of introducing them to her family too embarrassing.

On the bright side, it seemed the way I'd barged into her classroom apparently hadn't caused her too much trouble after the fact. That was a bit of a relief.

Norn and I were also getting along a little better, just in general. As a prime example, she'd recently asked me to tutor her in some of her subjects. I happily accepted, of course. I was ready to teach her all my secret techniques and everything I knew. But then I realized that if I spent too much time focusing on helping her, Aisha might get a little sulky over being left out.

After thinking it over a little, I decided to meet Norn in the library after school for regular tutoring sessions and limit them to an hour per day. We could go over the things she'd learned that day and review what her classes would be covering tomorrow. That could make a big difference by itself.

Norn was obviously trying hard to keep up, but she seemed to struggle with putting the theory from her textbooks into actual practice. That said, she wasn't nearly as bad as Eris or Ghislaine had been. With consistent effort, I felt confident she'd get up to an average level in no time.

"By the way, Ruijerd said he was from the Babynos area, right?" she asked me once. "I know you were in the Demon Continent for a while, Rudeus. Do you know where that is?"

"Hmm. Not off the top of my head. I think he said it's close to the Biegoya region, maybe? I've never been myself, though."

The two of us were on good enough terms now that we actually had some casual conversations during our study

sessions. But for some reason, Norn mostly just wanted to discuss Ruijerd. I guess he was our main common interest. Not that I really minded, you know? I was actually happy to have someone else I could talk to about him.

“I see... Sorry to keep pestering you, but what’s the Demon Continent like in general?”

“Well, all the monsters that live there are really big. The culture’s pretty different, also...but it has some similarities with this region, actually. Most of the people there are just ordinary folks living ordinary lives.”

I did notice that Norn still spoke to me a little stiffly. Her tone tended to be kind of overly polite, especially for a little sister talking to her own brother. Aisha and I had grown more informal with each other, but I guess Norn felt more comfortable this way for now.

“Oh, that reminds me, Rudeus. Did Ruijerd ever tell you the story of his spear?”

“Yeah, I’m never going to forget that one. Talk about a tear-jerker.”

“Absolutely... I do hope he manages to realize his goal eventually.”

“...Same here.”

It was about time that I moved that particular project forward, wasn’t it?

The general plan was to manufacture figurines of a Superd warrior and sell them bundled with a book. I hadn’t given up on it by any means, but Julie was still inexperienced and didn’t have much mana, so mass-producing figures wasn’t an option at present.

Still, that didn’t mean I couldn’t get to work on a prototype, at least.

The book was another matter. The main issue there had been finding the time to write. I'd spent many hours over the last few months learning Advanced Healing and Intermediate Detoxification magic. I was good at the brute memorization those subjects required, but they'd still kept me very busy.

At this point, I wasn't sure what I wanted to learn next.

Moving on to Advanced Detoxification seemed logical, but there wasn't anything else that really caught my interest. It wouldn't hurt to get my Fire and Wind magic up to the Saintly level, but that tier of spells tended to involve dramatic manipulations of the climate, rather than more practical spells you might use on a regular basis. Learning new things was always nice, but I wanted to focus on something more useful. Maybe even a skill like horseback riding.

As I was running the possibilities through my head, it occurred to me that I could take some of my newfound spare time and use it to work on my book about the Superd. I could probably get a little writing done during my sessions with Norn too.

I was looking to write a frank, straightforward summary of the tribe's tragic history. Prose wasn't my strong point, but I could probably pull something together if I really put my mind to it.

Or so I told myself at first. But when I found myself staring at that first blank piece of paper, I couldn't even decide where to begin.

Was it best to just write down the facts, like the script of a documentary? Would it be more readable in the form of a diary? I'd often heard it said that you were better off starting with a small project for your first piece of creative writing, rather than trying to draft an epic masterpiece right

off the bat. Maybe I should make this a booklet, no longer than ten or so pages. It would be easier to hand that out with the figurines, anyway.

If I went that route, it was probably best to keep it simple and light. I could make it into a basic good-versus-evil story, with Laplace revealed as the true villain.

Wait...wasn't Laplace considered a legendary hero on the Demon Continent, though? If I made him sound totally evil, I might piss a lot of people off.

One afternoon, as I was struggling with these questions for the hundredth time, Norn peered over at my work.

"What are you writing there, Rudeus?"

"I'm trying to put together a book about Ruijerd's past, actually. The problem is: I'm not sure how to approach the project."

"Hmm..."

Her interest evidently piqued, Norn pulled my paper over and took a closer look. At the top was my working title: "The Tale of the Great Warrior Ruijerd and the Persecution of His People."

There was only about a page of actual text so far, mainly a quick outline of who Ruijerd was and what he was like. Of course, I was pretty biased, so he came out sounding kind of like a saintly hero.

"Is this all you've got so far?"

"Yeah, I haven't made much progress yet."

The main issue was that I didn't know where to start the actual story, or how to tell it. I still remembered Ruijerd's tales of his people's actions in the Laplace War, and I knew the basic story of their persecution afterward. Still, it had been several years since I heard these stories, so I was a

little fuzzy on some of the fine details. In hindsight, I really should have taken some notes at the time.

"W-would you mind letting me help out?" asked Norn tentatively.

It was a very unexpected offer. But apparently, Ruijerd had made a habit of sitting my sister on his lap every night, patting her on the head, and telling her stories from his past.

Not fair. I never got to sit on Ruijerd's lap! Okay, wait. Let's try to be an adult about this.

"That would be a huge help, Norn. Just make sure you don't neglect your studies, okay?"

"All right!"

From that day on, Norn and I started working on the project together. When she had a little extra time in between her lessons and her study sessions, she would use it to write down Ruijerd's stories. Her writing was a little childish at times, and always had some rough spots. But for some reason, reading it made me remember Ruijerd so vividly that I often caught myself tearing up. It had a *punch* to it.

The more I read of her writing, the more I started to feel like she might have some talent in this area. Again, I wasn't exactly an unbiased observer—but you do tend to improve faster when you're doing something you enjoy. If she kept at it long enough, maybe she'd blossom into a brilliant author someday.

For the moment, though, I focused on fixing her minor mistakes and clumsy sentences. I was basically the team editor now.

I had a feeling the book was going to turn out a lot better this way than if I tried to write it myself.

While my relationship with Norn was beginning to improve, there had been a small development with Aisha too. For once, it had nothing to do with Norn. The two of them still weren't especially friendly with each other, though Aisha was being careful not to insult her sister ever since I scolded her for it. She was always at least superficially polite when her sister came to visit.

That actually concerned me a little bit. I didn't want her to feel like she couldn't express her real thoughts at all. I was happy that Norn was starting to warm up to me, but that didn't mean I could neglect my relationship with Aisha either. And so I decided to give her permission to speak her mind.

"You know, Aisha...if there's something you want to say, you don't have to bottle it up inside."

"Could you be more specific, Rudeus?"

"Well, I don't know. I've been spending a lot of time with Norn lately, right? Maybe you're feeling a little attention-starved or something? Maybe you've been working too hard and need a vacation? Maybe you want to spend the whole day in bed?"

Putting a finger to her chin, Aisha tilted her head to the side in puzzlement. Too cute. "You're giving me permission to be selfish, then?"

"That's right. You can be a little selfish around me. There's no need to hold back."

"Hmm...well! One thing *does* come to mind."

That mischievous smile on her face was setting off some alarm bells. What was she planning to demand? Hopefully not my body, even as a joke. I'd have to make up

some excuse to refuse, and then she'd probably be sulky for a week.

"I'd like a salary, please!"

Well, *that* wasn't what I'd been expecting.

"A salary...?"

Now that I thought about it, though, Aisha had been working diligently as our maid for some time now. If anything, it was strange that we weren't paying her. But then again, we were family, right? She wasn't an employee.

Maybe we could think of it like an allowance, then. She was helping out around the house all day, so she wanted some extra pocket money. Fair enough.

"Okay, we can do that."

I agreed to the general idea immediately, but we waited until Sylphie got back home to discuss the specifics. When I offered her a relatively large amount of money, though, she actually declined and tried to talk me down to a smaller figure.

Talk about mature. Was this kid really only ten years old?

In the end, we settled on a number we could all agree on.

"Can I ask why you brought this up, though? Is there something you want to buy?" I had to admit I was curious about what had prompted this request. Aisha could buy whatever she wanted, of course, but it couldn't hurt to know what that was.

"Well, a girl has her needs."

Wow, that really clears things up. I was sort of hoping to hear what those needs are, kid...

"Are you that curious, brother dear? All right, then. Why don't you come along on my next shopping trip?"

Ooh. That sounded like a date. A date with my little sister! What a lovely concept.

I did let Sylphie know about our plans in advance. Unfortunately, she was going to be working that day. I felt slightly guilty about running around town with another girl while my wife was at the office, but it's not cheating when it's your little sister.

What was Aisha planning to buy, though? Hopefully it wouldn't be a muscular slave or something. I didn't want some sweaty macho guy hanging around in my living room all the time, to be honest. It was bad enough having a giant six-armed monster randomly drop in for dinner... Not that he'd stopped by in months.

On the day of our date, Aisha led me to the market and headed straight for a general goods store that sold all sorts of miscellaneous everyday products. The shelves were stuffed with knick-knacks, but there were no other customers to be seen. From the looks of things, they mainly sold secondhand goods.

After browsing a little, Aisha bought three small flowerpots there.

"What are you going to do with those?" I asked. "Drop them on the heads of any Demon Kings who happen to be passing by?"

"Uh, no. I was just going to plant some flowers in them," said Aisha, looking up at me bashfully. "As long as you don't mind, of course."

There was only one possible way for me to reply to that. "Of course I don't mind."

Still, I hadn't really pictured Aisha as the flower girl type. I mainly thought of her as an energetic baby genius. In my mind, her hobbies were cleaning up, counting money, and balancing budgets.

Growing plants was more of a slow, contemplative hobby. You had to let nature take its course, watching the results unfold over the course of weeks or months. And even a genius wasn't going to be 100 percent successful at growing things.

But maybe that was exactly why it appealed to her? She was used to being able to manipulate things to her liking. This would be partially out of her control.

"Shouldn't you buy some potting soil too, then?" I said. "The earth around here isn't the most fertile, so it won't be easy to grow flowers in it."

"I was going to ask you to make some for me with your magic, Rudeus. If you don't mind?" She hit me with the pleading eyes again. There was only one possible reply.

"Of course I don't mind."

I was a man, after all. The idea of digging around in the dirt and sowing some seeds held a certain appeal for me. I'd have to whip her up some amazing soil later. The kind that lets you grow baobab trees from tulip seeds.

"What kind of flowers were you thinking of planting?"

"I collected a bunch of different seeds on the way up here, actually. I'll use those."

"Those might not actually grow, just so you're aware."

"Hmm. I think it'll probably be okay."

The two of us puttered around in the store for a little longer, chatting about Aisha's plans. I picked out a pair of earrings for Sylphie before we left—shaped like teardrops,

with little blue stones in the center. These would definitely look good on her.

“Is that a present for Sylphie?”

“Yep. I’m the kind of man who doesn’t take his wife for granted.”

“Sylphie is a lucky woman, all right. But when she’s busy, brother dear, maybe you could spare *me* a little love as well.”

Oh, the upturned eyes again. As always, there was only one possible reply.

“Not happening. The old man would beat me senseless.”

“Darn...”

We paid for our purchases and left the little store behind.

Our next stop was a place that specialized in the sale of fabrics and furnishings. There were big rolls of handwoven cloth hanging all over the place. Princess Ariel had actually recommended this store to me a while ago, back when I was buying rugs for the house. They sold good-quality stuff at a wide range of prices and seemed to attract a broad clientele. I didn’t know how my sister had learned about it, though.

Inside the store, Aisha quickly picked out some curtains. They were pink and frilly and were definitely the expensive side.

When she took them up to the counter, though, she proceeded to haggle ruthlessly with the clerk. She dropped my name *and* Princess Ariel’s and used every single card she had to play. By the end, she’d managed to talk them down to an only moderately pricey figure.

“Do you have enough to pay for those, Aisha? I can chip in a little if you want.”

“That’s okay! I’ve got exactly enough.”

Handing over the remainder of her allowance, Aisha completed her purchase. She’d used every coin of the money I’d given her. The girl had a real way with money. It was a little frightening, to be honest.

“It’s a good idea to save a little bit of your pocket money for later, you know,” I warned as we left the store. “Unexpected expenses can pop out of nowhere.”

Hell, you might get teleported to the Demon Continent for no apparent reason.

Ever since that incident, I’d made a habit of hiding cash inside my clothes at all times. I even had a few bills in the soles of my shoes.

“Okay! I’ll save a little next time!”

Still, flowerpots and frilly pink curtains, huh? I really had taken Aisha for a little brainiac so far, but she clearly had a girly side.

“I’ve always wanted a few cute things like these, you know,” she said.

“What, Lilia wouldn’t buy them for you?”

“Mom always said no. She thinks it’s wrong for a maid to decorate based on her personal tastes. I hope you don’t mind, Rudeus...”

The girl wasn’t just clever; she was good at playing with your emotions. Not only had she wrapped her arms around my waist, she was looking up at me with Bambi eyes. I knew it was all an act, of course, but it was so cute, I couldn’t bring myself to care.

There was only one possible reply, anyway.

“It’s totally fine, Aisha.”

Good thing I wasn’t a creepy old man or anything. I might have kidnapped her on the spot.

In the weeks following this little date, Aisha’s room grew steadily more girly. She seemed to like cute, tiny things and kept finding small pots to plant small flowers in and lining up fist-sized dolls on her shelves. At some point, she even embroidered charming little designs on the hem of her apron. I was starting to get a little worried she might evolve into a *gyaru* if this kept going.

Still, both of my sisters were doing well. I was content.

Although she wasn’t my sister, Nanahoshi was finally getting her groove back too. In our last experiment, she’d managed to summon a plastic bottle. That bottle was currently sitting on the windowsill in her laboratory, serving as a vase for a single flower. With that success under our belts, we’d moved onto the second phase of her plan.

“From this point on, we’ll be trying to summon organic matter from our old world,” she declared to me one afternoon.

“Organic matter?”

“That’s right. I was thinking we could start with food.”

After my contribution to her recent success, Nanahoshi seemed a bit more inclined to trust me than before. She actually took the time to review the phases of her plan with me:

Summon an inorganic object.

Summon something composed of organic matter.

Summon a living thing—a plant or small animal.

Summon a living thing that fits certain specific criteria.

Return a summoned living thing to its previous location.

The plastic bottle we'd summoned previously might not technically be a fully inorganic object, depending on how you defined the term, but she didn't seem to regard this as a major issue.

"Hmm. Is that step with the specific criteria really that important?"

"Well, I'd say so. When I'm teleporting myself back home, I don't want to pop back out in a foreign country or something."

Basically, she wanted to get closer and closer to summoning something as complex as a human being and, at the very end, teleport herself back to Japan with pinpoint accuracy. Every step of the experiment was building up to that specific goal.

At our current stage, she was already capable of setting some conditions on *what* she summoned, but these were fairly broad. The individual results would vary widely. For example, if she tried to summon a cat, she might get a tortoiseshell female house cat, a spotted tomcat, a tiger, or a panther.

Her research right now was focused on finding ways to make her spells more precise. She wanted to be able to summon a house cat, not just a feline—and even specify the exact *kind* of house cat that she wanted.

"Defining the conditions is quite tricky, though," she muttered, more to herself than me. "I suppose I'll have to go see the old man again at some point."

This old man was presumably the authority on summoning magic who she'd mentioned once or twice before.

“Does this guy know a lot about this, uh, conditional summoning?”

“Well...”

Nanahoshi put her hand to her chin and thought for a moment, then nodded to herself and began to explain. “Let me elaborate a little. In this world, summoning magic is generally divided between *fiend* summoning and *spirit* summoning.”

“Really?”

Fiend summoning apparently referred to calling forth specific monsters. You’d summon an intelligent creature using a complex set of magic circles, pay it some form of compensation, and set it to work for you. This was the kind of summoning that people generally thought of when they used the word.

Usually, this meant summoning garden-variety monsters of the kind you might encounter in the wild. It was also possible, however, to summon legendary beasts believed to reside in other worlds. Nor was fiend summoning limited to living things—it was possible to target inanimate objects, too. Nanahoshi producing that plastic bottle would technically be categorized as a fiend summoning spell.

If I mastered this, I might be able to summon the panties Master Roxy was wearing!

Spirit summoning, on the other hand, was a very different kind of technique. This actually involved *creating* artificial entities out of mana. Designing these spells was apparently similar to programming, in a way.

“Just so you know, it’s best we don’t discuss that part openly,” she said.

“Why?”

“Most people think that spirits are living things that reside in the Barren World, and we’re just calling them to ours.”

In other words, it was thought of as just another variation on fiend summoning.

Fiends were harder to control, but they could think and act on their own, and they could adapt to unfamiliar circumstances. By contrast, spirits were quite easy to control but usually only acted in a few set patterns. That said, if you had the “programming” chops to build some very complex code, you might be able to craft a spirit that could pass for human. She’d seen some at the aforementioned old man’s place.

“And on a slightly different note...here’s that magic circle I promised you earlier.”

Nanahoshi handed me a scroll. There was a dense, complicated magic circle inscribed at its center, covering about half a page.

“What is this?”

“A summoning scroll for a lamplight spirit.”

A lamplight spirit was a simple thing that would float along behind the summoner while emitting a bright light. It was capable of understanding simple commands like “light up that area,” but as time passed, its mana would dwindle until it disappeared. It was a very basic spirit, but if you used enough mana, it could stick around for a relatively long amount of time.

It wasn’t the most exciting spell I’d ever learned. To be honest, I’d been expecting something a little flashier for my reward.

“This magic circle is an original creation of that old man I keep talking about, by the way,” Nanahoshi said. “Not

even the Magicians' Guild knows about it."

"Huh? Really?"

When I heard it was a limited-edition product, though, it suddenly seemed a lot more exciting. I guess I was still Japanese at heart.

"Yeah. And I'll get you something more impressive next time, okay? I promise."

Nanahoshi pressed her hands together in a pleading gesture. I hadn't seen anyone do that in a *long* time. It made me a little nostalgic.

"I think you should be able to use your earth magic to make a template of that design," she said. "That way, you can print a whole bunch of copies. I'm sure the Magicians' Guild would pay handsomely for them."

"You're okay with me selling copies? Won't the guy who made it get upset?"

"Trust me, he's got bigger things on his mind. I doubt he'd even care."

Hmm. Well, it was good to know you didn't need to write out magic scrolls by hand every single time, at least.

"If you do decide to sell them to the guild, make sure you mention my name," she added. "That should ensure they don't try to rip you off."

"Got it. Thanks."

I decided to file that idea away for now. It never hurt to have a potential source of income in your back pocket.

In any case, the fact that these spirits were purely artificial was interesting. I felt like it might be relevant to Zanoba's project. By combining different disciplines of magic, maybe we could make ourselves a robot capable of saying "hawawa" every time it got flustered.

"Oh. By the way, Nanahoshi...if you can randomly summon objects from our old world now, isn't there a chance we could bring over some really useful stuff?"

It seemed like a decent idea on the face of it, but Nanahoshi shook her head. "At this stage, I'm only capable of summoning simple objects composed of a single consistent substance. Although I suppose that does give us a fairly wide range of possibilities."

A single consistent substance, huh? That explained why the plastic bottle hadn't come with a cap or label. But if she got better at setting her conditions, maybe we could summon complex objects piece by piece and then put them back together.

"Also, it's not a great idea to pull *too* many things that belong in our old world into this one. I think I mentioned this before, didn't I?"

Oh, was she still worried about that whole "messing with the timeline" thing?

"I feel like you're being a little too paranoid about that, honestly..." I said.

"You're welcome to test that theory *after* I'm safely back home. I'd rather not take any chances."

Wow. Cold!

Zanoba, meanwhile, had finally managed to finish up his red wyrm figurine the other day. It didn't look exactly like the one I'd seen, what with the horns on its forehead and all...but it looked cool, and that was the most important thing.

Julie was very happy with her belated present. She wasn't the sort of kid who smiled a lot, but she spent quite

some time holding the figurine up, oohing and aahing as she examined it from different angles.

“Thank you very much, Master! Thank you, Grandmaster!”

Turning around to face the two of us, she executed a slightly stiff but respectable bow.

“You’re welcome,” Zanoba said with a lordly nod. “Keep up the hard work.”

“Yes, sir!” she replied happily.

Julie was speaking the Human Tongue much more fluently these days. It wasn’t because of anything I’d done, though. Ginger made a habit of correcting her whenever she slipped up, and you always learn faster when you have someone to point out your mistakes.

“Aren’t you a lucky girl, Julie? Make sure you take good care of it,” Ginger said.

“Yes! Thank you too, Miss Ginger.”

Ginger was now a constant presence in Zanoba’s room. She usually kept herself positioned by the wall, stepping out to fetch drinks for Zanoba or see to the needs of his visitors. At the moment, she was renting an apartment in a building close to the University. I’d once asked her why she didn’t just move into the empty room for bodyguards next to Zanoba’s chambers, but she said it would be “presumptuous” of her to reside next door to the prince.

Their arrangement felt less like a master/servant relationship and more like a very weird commuter marriage. Or maybe the bond between a cult leader and his most faithful disciple. The woman would probably cut her stomach open instantly if Zanoba ordered her to.

“Did you need something, Rudeus?”

"I was just wondering why you swore loyalty to Zanoba in the first place."

Ginger nodded at my abrupt question, looking rather pleased. "The prince's mother asked me personally to take care of him. And I swore, in that moment, to devote myself to his service."

"Hmm. Well, that's nice. Go on."

"What do you mean? That's the story."

Wait, that's it? That was enough to make you put up with all of this?!

Then again, swearing an oath of fealty was probably serious business. If you were going to break that promise when you were treated poorly, you probably wouldn't make it in the first place. I'd once read in some manga that feudal society was composed of a few natural-born sadists and a great number of masochists. Maybe Ginger just fell in that second category.

When I thought of it that way, it made a *little* bit more sense...although the reality was probably something not quite as crude.

Cliff was making progress with his research too. He'd recently completed his first prototype of a magical tool to suppress the symptoms of Elinalise's curse. He announced this to me personally one day, looking even prouder of himself than usual.

"Essentially, it forces in external mana to counteract the flow of internal mana. It's not enough to eliminate the curse, but it slows it down."

He went on to explain the details in complex, technical language. A lot of it dealt with how he "aligned" the external mana with the "frequency" of the curse's mana in a very

specific way. He also spent a lot of time emphasizing his own brilliance, though, so I think I'll omit that part.

The bottom line was that he'd found a way to make Elinalise's curse less severe.

"However, there are two remaining problems," he said.

At this point in the conversation, Cliff finally let me see the device itself. It was a bulky loincloth of sorts—the kind of thing a sumo wrestler might wear. To be honest, I would have taken it for an adult diaper.

"I see. Well, the most obvious issue would be that it's not exactly fashionable."

"Indeed. I couldn't ask Lise to walk around wearing this thing, of course."

The two of them had actually gotten into a fight about it—and they almost never fought. Elinalise had actually said she didn't care how it looked, but Cliff stubbornly refused to give in. I guess he was too proud to bear the idea of making his girlfriend look ridiculous.

They'd made up over the course of a single passionate night, incidentally. Their love was as nauseating as ever.

"Zanoba and Silent volunteered to help me out, and we've developed a plan to miniaturize the device. I'd like to make it significantly more effective too. But I am a genius, so I'm sure it's only a matter of time."

His ultimate goal was to make a device no larger than an ordinary pair of panties. It was hard to say if that was feasible, but if he did pull it off, maybe we could make a pair of gloves for Zanoba, too. It might give him a chance to make figurines with his own hands.

Then again, I had a feeling he might just be naturally clumsy even without the super strength.

"So, what's the other problem you mentioned?"

Cliff frowned. "That's actually the reason why I called you here today, Rudeus."

"Oh?"

"The thing is...the implement currently consumes far too much mana to be practical."

As I recalled, magical implements required someone to pump them full of mana before they could work. Less efficient ones weren't considered especially useful for real-world applications. Ideally, Cliff wanted something that Elinalise could wear constantly, while consuming only as much mana as she could stand to spare. But right now, the device was so thirsty for power that Cliff couldn't even keep it running for an hour.

"We're going to try to keep honing the design, but I could really use your help. Without you, we'd only be able to charge the thing up a few times a day."

"Ah, right. Okay, then. I'll help out when I can."

Cliff considered himself a genius magician, and his mana capacity was certainly on the greater side. But even so, it wasn't close to enough. This was exactly where I could come in handy.

From that day on, I started to help out with Cliff's experiments, too.

Incidentally, the device did nothing to make Elinalise any less horny.

Lately, I felt like my life had settled into a smooth and pleasant rhythm.

I woke up in the morning, did my training, ate breakfast, and went to the University. I stopped by to see Zanoba and then Cliff, checking in on the progress of their research and occasionally offering some advice. After lunch, I headed over to help out Nanahoshi with her summoning experiments. And once classes ended, I took an hour to tutor Norn.

On my way back home, I went grocery shopping with Sylphie, and Aisha greeted us at the front door. Sylphie and I took a bath together, and the three of us ate dinner. Then we practiced magic in the living room and talked about our days.

After Aisha went to bed, I worked on the baby-making project with Sylphie, then fell into a sound sleep with my wife as my body pillow. Each day went much like the one before it, but I still felt like I was making steady progress toward my goals.

Maybe this was what happiness felt like?

It wasn't something I'd gotten much of in my first try at life. But assuming Paul made it back safe and sound in a year or so, things should only get better from here.

Chapter 7: The Third Turning Point

LIFE COMES AT YOU fast sometimes.

I was doing my usual training routine one pleasant summer morning, feeling good about things in general. I hadn't seen Badigadi around for months but wasn't too concerned. The man was impulsive at the best of times, so there wasn't much point worrying about him.

That was what Elinalise always said, at least. And it had proven to be true so far.

When I finished up and went back into the house, I found Aisha and Sylphie in the hallway with serious expressions on their faces. They turned to look at me as I stepped in the door.

"Oh..."

"Rudy..."

Something about the atmosphere in here was making me nervous. Did we have a problem or something?

"Err..." said Sylphie, scratching at the back of her ears with an awkward smile. "Haha, wow. This is making me more nervous than I expected..."

"There's no reason to hesitate, Sylphie!" said Aisha.
"Go on! Be brave!"

My wife stepped forward. After a moment's hesitation, she crossed her hands in front of her stomach and spoke. "Well, Rudy. It's actually...been two months now. Since my last, uh, you know..."

Her last...? Oh. Oh, wow.

“And, well, I haven’t been feeling so well lately, and I was starting to wonder.”

I couldn’t help myself from staring at Sylphie’s stomach. It didn’t look any different at the moment. Was this really happening?

“So I went with Aisha to the neighborhood doctor, and...they said, uh, congratulations.”

“Oh... Ohhh...”

My voice was trembling. So were my hands. And my legs, for that matter.

Congratulations? She was pregnant? We were actually going to have a kid. This wasn’t a dream, right?

An experimental pinch of my cheek made me wince. So much for that theory.

I swallowed loudly.

Right. Of course. Why wouldn’t she be pregnant? I was a man who could make things happen, when I really set my mind to it. This had always been part of the plan. I just hadn’t been expecting it to happen so quickly, since everyone said elves had a hard time getting pregnant.

I was a little startled—that was all.

“Uhm, Rudy...any thoughts?”

Sylphie was looking at me anxiously. I wasn’t sure what to say, though. This was all so sudden.

“Can I, uh...touch your stomach?”

“Huh? Err, sure. Go ahead.”

I reached down and stroked Sylphie’s belly. It was still slender, with no additional fat that I could feel. Her skin was warm to the touch and surprisingly soft. The same as always, in other words. But when I focused closely, I felt like I could feel a *slight* hint of a bump.

That was probably just my imagination, right? The kid wouldn't be that big yet.

"Right... Our kid's in here..."

When I spoke those words out loud, I felt a sudden surge of emotion building up inside me. What was this feeling? I had to repress the urge to start shouting incoherently.

I had a *kid* on the way. I was going to be a dad.

It didn't feel real yet. But it still made me incredibly happy.

Was happy even the right term? The word felt so inadequate. What was I feeling right now? Could you even put this into words?

"Brother dear? Isn't there anything you'd like to say to your wife?" Aisha's words snapped me back to reality.

"Muh?"

Something I need to say? Like what? Congratulations? No, that can't be right.

Maybe I should thank her. Yeah, that sounds better.

"Thank you, Sylphie."

"Huh?"

Sylphie smiled, but she looked a little puzzled. Had I guessed wrong? What was the answer, then? I searched my memory for a hint. What had Paul said to Zenith, back when we found out Norn was on the way? Something like "Well done," right? Or maybe "Nice job!"

I didn't like those options very much, though. Did he think women only got pregnant when they tried really hard or something? Maybe. Maybe he was that stupid.

...Pregnant, huh? Yeah. Sylphie's pregnant. I got this sweet, beautiful girl pregnant. Me, of all people.

The more I thought about it, the more my emotions threatened to overwhelm me. I was actually starting to tear up.

“I’m sorry... I don’t, uh...think I know what to say. Sorry, Sylphie...”

“Oof! Uhm, Rudy?”

Instead of continuing, I’d thrown my arms around Sylphie. I wanted to lift her up into the air and spin her around a few times for good measure, but this wasn’t the time for that. She had a baby in her belly. I needed to be very, very gentle with her.

“Hehehe. You did want children pretty badly, didn’t you?”

My wife wrapped her arms around me as well, and started to pat me on the back.



I gave her one more gentle squeeze, then finally released her. Stepping back, I stared down into her eyes. I could see my face reflected in them, and it wasn't a pretty sight. I had tears running down my cheeks.

Sylphie closed her eyes. I kissed her and stroked her hair, enjoying the softness of her lips. This was what love felt like, wasn't it?

"Ahem."

Aisha cleared her throat, reminding me that we weren't alone in the room. I'd started groping Sylphie's breasts *and* butt without even realizing it.

"Brother dear, we need to be gentle with the lady of the house for a while. You're going to need to refrain from... intercourse for the moment."

She's right. Bad Rudeus! Bad!

No matter how lovable my wife was, I needed to control myself from now on. Then again...she was less than two months pregnant, right? And we'd been doing it every three days up until now. It probably wouldn't hurt to keep going just a little longer...

No! No. Keep it together, man.

"Right. Of course."

Aisha smiled and lifted the hem of her skirt slightly upward. "If you're desperate, I'm always available to pick up the slack."

"Not a chance in hell, kiddo."

She pouted a little at that. It was nice of her to offer and all, but even putting all the moral issues aside, I just wasn't attracted to her. That suited me fine, anyway. The last thing I needed was to destroy my marriage by messing with the maid.

"Well, then, brother dear, I'm going to go inform Princess Ariel of this development. I expect Miss Sylphie will need to put her work on hold for some time, after all."

That hadn't even occurred to me, but she was right. You wouldn't want a pregnant woman working as a bodyguard. Sylphie was going to need a leave of absence.

"I'll go," I said. "I should really explain the situation myself."

Aisha sighed at me. "Rudeus, you *really* need to stay with Sylphie for the moment. You've got lots to talk about, remember?"

Do we? Oh, right. I guess we do. This kind of changes everything, after all.

"With that settled, I'll be going now."

"Right. Okay. Thanks, Aisha."

My little sister left the house in high spirits, leaving me and Sylphie behind by ourselves.

A few minutes later, the two of us were sitting next to each other on the sofa.

I cautiously reached out to take Sylphie's hand. She squeezed mine back and leaned her head against my shoulder. Neither of us said anything for a while.

I wasn't sure where to begin, honestly.

The only words that were coming to me were variations of "I'll take responsibility for my actions." But we were already married, so that didn't make much sense.

"Uhm, Sylphie..."

"Yes, Rudy?"

"I know this might be tough, but...we'll do it together."

"Well, I think I'll be doing *most* of the work."

Laughing softly, Sylphie laid down on the couch and put her head in my lap. I used my free hand to stroke her head and rub behind her ears.

"Hey, Rudy."

"Yeah?"

"Do you want a boy or a girl?"

The question took me by surprise. I'd almost forgotten babies came in two varieties.

"I mean, not that we really get to choose," Sylphie added, smiling gently.

Hmm. Which *would* be better?

Maybe a boy would be nice, just to have an heir to the family? But it wasn't like I was the head of some feudal clan or anything. We could pass down everything to a girl just as easily...not that we even had much of a fortune to be inherited at the moment.

Back in my old life, I probably would have said, "A girl!" with a creepy grin on my face. Maybe even suggested that we take pictures of her every single day to record her growth into adulthood. What a very foolish man I used to be.

Right now, though, I couldn't find any reason to prefer one over the other. As long as it was a healthy, happy kid, I'd be satisfied either way.

"You know, Rudy, I'm kind of relieved."

"Why?"

"It feels like I'm *really* your wife now."

"..."

Just like in my old world, having children was a major reason why people got married here. Sylphie had probably

been a little anxious about that part of things, since it was harder for her people to get pregnant. Not that I would have left her over something like that, of course.

"Anyway, I guess this is going to be kind of rough on you too, huh?" she said. "Since we can't, uh, do it for a while."

"Hey, I'll live."

I could put up with a dry spell under *these* circumstances. Unlike certain old men I could mention.

"Feel free to kick me out of the house for good if I go off and sleep with another woman, all right? I'd deserve it," I said.

"...Oh, I don't think I'd be that angry. Maybe a little sad. But I'd understand."

Really? That seemed like an awfully mild reaction. I wasn't going to betray her or anything, though. I knew I'd feel like total crap if *she* went out and cheated on me.

"I think I'd get upset if you messed around with another guy, to be honest," I confessed.

Sylphie just laughed softly and smiled. It was an expression she only ever wore around me. No one else ever got to see it. And that made me really happy.

We spent some quiet time together.

In the evening, Aisha came back to our house with Norn in tow.

"C-congratulations, Sylphie," said Norn, bowing politely.

"Thanks, Norn," said Sylphie, smiling as she patted her on the head.

That got Norn smiling as well. She didn't seem to mind being petted as much as you might think. Maybe she

actually enjoyed it, coming from the right person. In any case, it was nice to see the two of them getting along so well.

“Everyone wanted to come by and congratulate you, but I convinced them to postpone their visits for a few days,” said Aisha in a calm tone of voice. She’d apparently assumed I would want to keep this an intimate family occasion for today.

I didn’t remember suggesting anything of the kind, but it seemed reasonable enough. Sylphie would probably be a little embarrassed or overwhelmed to have a lot of people congratulating all her at once. It was better to give it a few days.

“Princess Ariel indicated that Miss Sylphie is expected to take a break from her duties for at least two years. She also said she would arrange for a leave of absence from the school. Great-Aunt Elinalise has volunteered to assume Sylphie’s bodyguard duties in the interim.”

“Is Grandma really going to be okay? I mean, she has that curse and everything...”

“She assured me that she could manage, Madam. I wouldn’t worry about her.”

Elinalise did know how to take care of herself, and she had that magical implement now. Besides, she could always pull Cliff into an empty classroom or storage room if she needed to get busy during school hours.

“Prince Zanoba says he’ll be paying us a visit five days from now, in the evening. He wanted to have dinner with us, so I’ll get things ready for that. Princess Ariel will be stopping by in ten days, also at night, but she indicated that she wouldn’t be dining with us. Cliff and Great-Aunt Elinalise will be coming along on that visit. Miss Linia and Miss Pursena indicated they’d wander by sometime, but I don’t

have any details as to when that might be. Miss Nanahoshi offered a brief message of congratulations to you both. I wasn't able to find Lord Badigadi, but I left a message for him."

Aisha had rattled off the whole list of our friends quickly and efficiently, in a steady tone of voice. It was like we had a personal secretary or something. The girl was definitely good at her job.

"Got it. Thanks for letting everyone know, Aisha."

"Of course, brother dear."

Aisha looked over at Norn with a prideful smirk on her face. Norn met her gaze with a frown.

Aisha still seemed to take a certain degree of malicious joy in showing her sister up like this. There was some lingering conflict between them involving their positions in the family. I was always telling Aisha that she was an equal member of the family, and that it didn't matter if she had a different mother...but the two of them still fought constantly, over the most minor things.

They did say squabbling with someone can be a sign of how close you are. It was probably okay to let things be, as long as this didn't turn into a cold war. They never said anything *really* cruel to each other when they fought, at least.

"I've got to say, though," I murmured, "Dad's probably going to be shocked when he shows up and finds out I've got a kid coming."

"Oh, yeah!" said Norn, her face lighting up at the mention of Paul. She really did love her dad. I could see her putting down "marrying my daddy" on her list of dreams for the future. "I can't wait to see the look on his face!"

"He's the type to spoil his grandkids rotten, so I bet he'll be overjoyed," I said. "He was really sweet when you two were born too."

Aisha and Norn both looked a little nonplussed for a moment. Neither of them had any memory of those days, of course.

"Well, anyway! I'm really looking forward to it, Rudeus!" Norn announced. Those unusually cheerful words put a smile on everyone's face.

Sylphie and I were happily married. Paul and Zenith and Lilia would be with us soon enough. And my little sisters were here too. That was the life I'd dreamed of way back in the Buena Village days, and it was close at hand.

The *bad* news arrived two months later.

I received a letter, dated six months in the past. It had been sent by express delivery post. The sender's name was Geese. And the contents, as was usual with express letters, were very brief.

"Having trouble rescuing Zenith. Requesting help."

The instant I saw those words, the world flashed white before my eyes.

When I came to, I found myself in a pure white space. I'd been transformed back into the foul person I used to be, and felt a surge of anger and resentment wash over me.

I stared sullenly at the figure in front of me. It was the smiling Man-God, whose face was nothing but a blur.

"Hey, there."

What the hell is going on?

“What are you talking about?”

That letter. The one from Geese. He said the rescue isn't going well. What's the deal?

“Well, I expect it means the rescue isn't going well. What do you want from me?”

But that's not what you told me! You said I'd regret it if I went to the Begaritt Continent! What was all that about, then? Were you lying to me?!

“No, of course not. You'll regret it if you go to the Begaritt Continent. It was true back then, and it's still true now.”

Ah, now I see. I get it. I'll regret it if I go to the Begaritt Continent, but I'll also regret it if I don't go. Is that what you meant all along?

“Oh, I don't know about that. You weren't too unhappy with your life as of yesterday, were you? You made lots of friends here. You met many interesting people, and you did a lot of growing up. Your condition was cured, you made friends with your little sisters, you even got married! And now you've got a kid on the way.”

...Yeah, my life's not bad right now. But that's not the point! You told me not to go to Begaritt! You tricked me!

“I really didn't, though. Let me repeat myself one more time: If you go to the Begaritt Continent, you will definitely regret it.”

What? But my family's in trouble! Tell me why, at least!

“Can't do that, I'm afraid.”

Damn it! I should have known better. You're always like this!

"You're being awful harsh today. My advice has always proven helpful, hasn't it?"

"Maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that you misled me this time. Look, can you at least give me some of the details? What am I going to end up regretting? I can't make this decision unless I know the risks and rewards!"

"Most people have to make their decisions blind, you know. You're awfully demanding."

"I don't care if I'm being unreasonable. I don't want to regret my choices."

"Well, if you actually think it through, a few of the consequences should be obvious. You spent the last year and a half as a student, right? And your little sisters spent a year traveling here. If you'd gone to Begaritt instead, you would have missed each other completely."

"What? But Paul sent my sisters here because he saw my letter. If I hadn't written to him, they would have stuck around in Millis or waited in East Port."

"Not true. Even if he hadn't gotten your letter, Paul would have sent his kids to the Kingdom of Asura. Lilia's got family there, remember?"

...Sure, okay. I guess you're right.

"Things aren't so different now, really. Let's say you set out on a journey tomorrow. What happens to Sylphie and your kid? You planning to leave her here, all alone, while you hike halfway across the world?"

So basically, I'll have some regrets no matter what I do.

"Naturally. It's impossible to avoid having any regrets, I'm afraid. If you head to Begaritt, you're going to miss out on at least one golden opportunity. The way I see it, you're better off staying put."

Tch.

Well... if you're that sure about it, I guess I probably will end up regretting it. Fine...

"Right. Well, then, want to hear my advice?"

Yeah, sure. Can't hurt, I guess.

"Ahem. Rudeus, remain in Ranoa until the next mating season comes around. Linia and Pursena will pursue you aggressively. Choose one of them and begin a relationship with her. This will bring you greater happiness in the end."

What the hell?! You're telling me to cheat on my wife now?! I'm happy with Sylphie! And those two are just good friends, damn it!

His last words echoing dramatically in the air, the Man-God disappeared. And I slipped back into unconsciousness.

I woke up to find myself in bed. Sylphie was looking down at me with concern on her face.

"Oh, Rudy! Are you okay? You were moaning in your sleep."

"Yeah, I'm fine..."

What had happened after I received that letter? I couldn't remember the specifics very well. I recalled staring at the page in a stupor, but nothing else except my dream.

Things had been going too smoothly lately. I guess the shock had hit me hard.

Geese's letter was alarming. Something had obviously gone wrong. Still, I had the Man-God's words to consider. If I set out on now, there was a chance my family and I would pass each other on the road and I'd waste a couple years of my life.

Maybe this was too optimistic, but...there was a *chance* that Geese had just sent out that letter in a moment of panic. I mean, it wasn't Paul who had written to me. It was Geese. My monkey-faced cellmate.

Why would *he* write me a letter like this? Because he was trying to rescue Zenith too? But Paul's last letter hadn't mentioned him. It seemed likely Geese had found Zenith on his own.

The letter was written six months ago. It was possible he'd been alone and feeling helpless at the time but had met up with Paul and the others since then. Maybe he'd even sent a similar letter to Paul. They might have joined forces and rescued my mother a couple weeks later.

All of these were just possibilities, of course. I had absolutely no way of knowing what the situation really was. Not from this great a distance.

There was Sylphie's child to think of too. No matter how fast you traveled, it had to be a solid year's journey to reach the Begaritt Continent. I knew the road down to East Port from my last big journey, so it was possible I could cut the travel time down significantly. But even if I somehow managed to get there in six months, I wouldn't be back home for at least a year.

That wasn't going to work, right? I couldn't just leave my pregnant wife all alone to go on some adventure.

"This is about that letter, isn't it?"

"..."

I couldn't bring myself to answer. I'd promised Sylphie I wouldn't disappear on her again. I'd given her my word.

It wouldn't technically be "disappearing" if I explained everything beforehand. But that was just semantics. Even if

we talked it through beforehand—or if I left her a thorough letter—it would still be agonizing for her to be left behind.

“Uhm, Rudy...you don’t have to worry about me too much, okay? I’ve got Aisha here to take care of me.”

There was just a hint of anguish on Sylphie’s face. She was anxious, of course. This was her first pregnancy. Her belly was already getting bigger by the day. Sooner or later, it would be hard for her just to get up and down the stairs. And there was a chance I might die on this journey. I might never come back to her.

She’d fought down that fear to speak those words.

“...I’m not going anywhere. I’ll stay with you, Sylphie,” I said.

When I said that, she smiled, though she still looked a little conflicted.

The words of the Man-God continued to linger in my mind. No matter what choice I made, he’d insisted, I was going to end up regretting it.

The next three days were long and difficult.

Every time I saw them, Sylphie, Aisha, and Norn had anxious looks on their faces. I’d already told them I wasn’t going to the Begaritt Continent, but the more I thought about it, the more uncertain I felt. I was torn between my two choices, and there weren’t that many people I could turn to for advice.

The first, Elinalise, nodded when I told her of my intentions. “I think that’s wise, Rudeus. You’re better off staying behind for this one.”

The way she phrased that surprised me. It suggested she had other plans. “Are you going to go, Elinalise?”

"Sylphie's my granddaughter, Rudeus. It's only right that I take this job, for her sake as much as yours."

Apparently, she'd received an identical letter herself. And unlike me, she was ready and willing to go, even if it meant leaving her life here behind.

"Aren't you supposed to be guarding Princess Ariel, though?"

"There's very little real danger to her life while she's enrolled in this school. I wasn't doing much of anything, to be honest."

That was probably true *most* of the time, but you never knew when things might take a dangerous turn. That was the whole point of having bodyguards. But of course, that was Ariel's decision to make, and Elinalise had basically volunteered herself as a goodwill gesture. I doubted the princess would object to her backing out.

"What about Cliff?"

"I'll have to leave him. He might hate me forever, but I don't have much choice."

"Why don't you at least explain the situation? I'm sure he'd understand."

Elinalise shook her head with a melancholy smile. It didn't look much like her usual smirk.

"Cliff's a pure-hearted young man. He has talent, drive, and vision. I wouldn't be surprised if he becomes the pope one day. He's better off remembering me as nothing but a youthful indiscretion."

Well, that just made me feel terrible for the guy.

Members of the Millis church were expected to stay loyal to a single person. If Elinalise just disappeared, it might shake the very foundations of Cliff's faith. He was a

strong-willed person, but it was hard to know what losing his religion might do to him.

"And also...I'm the one who told you to stay here last time. That makes cleaning up this mess my responsibility, don't you think?"

Elinalise's words were so firm and clear that I found myself at a loss for words.

Apparently taking that as agreement, she nodded. "You just leave this to me and wait here, dear. I want to see a happy great-grandchild waiting for me when I make it back."

It was clear that nothing I could say was going to change her mind.

Next, I turned to Zanoba for advice. His expression didn't even change as I laid out the story.

"I see," he said calmly. "Well, I'm sure you'll deal with this matter easily enough and be back before too long. I will remain here and continue to pursue my research, but I do hope you'll return as quickly as possible."

"I kind of thought you'd ask me not to go, Zanoba. Or demand that I bring you along."

When we parted back in the Shirone Kingdom, he'd wept and hung all over me. A part of me had been hoping for something similar. But this time, his attitude was very different.

"Should you wish for me to accompany you, I would be loath to refuse. But I'm unaccustomed to lengthy journeys, and I fear I might prove a burden. And of course..." He shot a glance over at Julie. "I couldn't bring the girl on such a trip."

Julie was still a young child. Leaving her here in Ginger's care was an option, but that would mean putting

their studies and research on hold. And if she came along instead, it would be dangerous to have her keep exhausting herself by using up all her mana.

“Do you think I *should* go, Zanoba?”

“That is your decision to make, Master.”

He sounded almost dismissive now. I’d been hoping for some actual advice...

“However, if I may make one observation?” he said.

“Hmm?”

“The birth of a child does not *require* a father’s presence. If you’re worried about your parents, why not go to their aid? I’ll guarantee the safety of your wife and sisters in your absence.”

There was real conviction in Zanoba’s words. It made sense that royalty would have a different perspective on this sort of thing, though. Most kings probably didn’t rush to watch their concubines giving birth.

“I would of course prefer to have you at my side constantly,” he said, “but the choice is yours.”

“You make some decent points, Zanoba. Thanks for the advice.”

Sylphie wasn’t on her own here. She had Aisha, Zanoba, and Princess Ariel’s retinue.

She wasn’t alone. We weren’t alone.

What was I supposed to do at the end of the day? Stay or go?

Elinalise wanted me to wait here while she went to Begaritt alone. Zanoba wanted me to go, leaving matters here in his hands. Which path made more sense? Where was I *most* needed right now?

Zanoba's logic seemed sound. As long as Sylphie stayed healthy, everything would be just fine. My presence wasn't going to make a difference. Still, that attitude didn't sit right with me. I wasn't a king, and I didn't want to act like one. It was obviously better for Sylphie to have me here, providing emotional support.

Sylphie had encouraged me to go, and told me not to worry...but this was her first pregnancy. Deep down, I knew she had to be terrified. She was probably fighting the desire to break down and beg me not to leave.

I was the one who'd told her how I wanted kids over and over again. I might not even have been that serious about it at the time, but she'd obviously *taken* it seriously. And now that she was actually pregnant, I was thinking about leaving her behind while I traveled halfway around the world. That felt like a serious betrayal.

On the other hand...I had to admit that I'd been putting off my responsibility to help Paul for a long time now. I'd put my own happiness first for years. Hell, I'd prioritized fixing my "performance" problems over the search for my mother.

Maybe this was a wake-up call. Maybe it was finally time for me to pay the piper.

...I couldn't make up my mind. Both options would cost me greatly.

It was now the fourth day after the letter's arrival. I'd spent most of that time brooding over my dilemma. I wasn't sleeping well at all, and I couldn't motivate myself to bother with my usual training routine that morning. I was just sitting around on the first floor, bleary-eyed, doing nothing in particular.

The mornings were chilly here, even in summer, and I was feeling downright sluggish. For a while, I just watched

the sun rise.

“...Oh!”

After a while, I heard a small cry of surprise from behind me. Turning around, I saw that our front door was open, and Norn was standing in front of it. She had a large bag on her back—the same one I’d used in my days as an adventurer. It was packed to bursting point.

She was obviously preparing for a lengthy trip. But because she was only ten years old, it looked more like she was going on a picnic or something.

For a long moment, I just looked at her silently. Norn avoided my gaze. She looked like a kid who’d just been caught red-handed playing a prank on someone.

“Where are you off to?”

“...”

Norn didn’t answer, so I repeated myself. “Where are you going, Norn?”

Biting her lip, she finally looked me in the eye. “W-well... if you’re not going to help, Rudeus, I guess I have to go instead.”

I studied her face for a moment. Go where? She couldn’t seriously mean the Begaritt Continent, could she?

Norn was still so *small*. This was a ten-year-old kid we were talking about here.

“...”

There was no way that bag had anything close to what she’d need for this trip. She probably had some money, but did she know how to spend it wisely? Did she even know the route she would take? How did she intend to deal with the dangers she’d encounter on the way? She might get kidnapped by slavers the minute she set foot out of this city.

"Norn, I can't let you do that," I said.

"But I... I... Rudeus, please! Mom and Dad are in trouble!" She was tearing up now, but she kept her eyes fixed on mine. "Why...why aren't you going to help them?"

Why? Well, because I was going to have a child soon. I had my wife to think of.

"You're much stronger than me, Rudeus! You know how to travel! Why aren't you going?!"

She wasn't wrong. I wasn't as experienced as Elinalise, but I'd spent five years on the road as an adventurer. I had the knowhow, at least. And although there were plenty of people out there more powerful than me, I could hold my own in a fight.

As I was today, I could probably manage to travel across the Demon Continent even without Ruijerd's help.

"..."

It was all true. I *could* do this if I wanted to.

I'd been weighing the pros and cons of going for days now, but that was because I could *afford* to choose. Norn didn't have that choice. She wanted to go help, but she couldn't. I, on the other hand, had the ability to reach the Begaritt Continent, help our parents, and make it back safely.

That was the whole reason Geese had sent me that letter and not someone else.

"Okay, Norn. You're right."

"R-Rudeus?"

There were other people who could look after Sylphie for me. But I was the only one who could go save my parents.

It had to be me. I could cut through the Begaritt Continent to the city of Rapan. I could solve the problems Paul and the others had run into. There wasn't anyone else I could entrust this job to.

"I'll go. Can you look after the house for me?"

Norn's face lit up. But an instant later, she squeezed her lips together tightly and nodded with the most serious expression she could muster. "Absolutely!"

"Don't fight with Aisha. And help out Sylphie when you can, okay?"

"Of course!"

"All right. Good girl."

I felt terrible about doing this to Sylphie and our baby. If she dumped me over this one, I wouldn't blame her. But that wasn't how I should be thinking about this. I needed to trust my wife.

"I'll go to the Begaritt Continent, then."

I'd made up my mind now. I was going to save my parents.

Chapter 8: Farewells

THE BEGARITT CONTINENT was a massive island, so reaching it would require crossing the sea. And my specific destination, the Labyrinth City of Rapan, was located near the eastern coast.

There were two possible routes I could take. The first involved traveling to East Port, the King Dragon Realm's main harbor town, and catching a boat there. It wouldn't be the most direct route, but it would allow me to enter Begaritt from the east, cutting down the amount of traveling I'd have to do on that continent. This was the safest option.

The other possibility was catching a boat from the Kingdom of Asura instead, which would bring me to the northern shore of the continent. This would involve cutting through more Begaritt territory, making it a more dangerous path, but it would also save me a good amount of time.

My best guess was that the first plan would take me eighteen months and the second about twelve. Even the most efficient plan wouldn't get me there and back in the next seven months. I'd be missing out on the birth of my child, no matter what.

But that was far from my only worry, of course.

For once, I was going to disregard the Man-God's advice. Knowing him, he might have been fully aware that I wasn't going to agree with him, but I'd never done the exact opposite of what he recommended before. This was comparable to...if I'd avoided the Kingdom of Shirone entirely on my way through the Central Continent. Lilia and Aisha would still be captives there, and I never would have

met Aisha. I guess that might have kept me from running into Orsted, though.

Where would I be now if things had played out that way? We'd probably have made it to the refugee camp without too much trouble. Things might have ended just as terribly with Eris, though. And ten years down the road, I might have found out where Lilia and Aisha were, much to my regret.

Yeah. He did say I would regret this too. He'd repeated that both times I'd talked about it with him.

Based on that, the reasons probably had nothing to do with my timing. No matter when I went to Begaritt, I would end up with some new regrets. But there was no telling what those would be. I could imagine all sorts of possibilities. I might end up losing something. Like one of my hands, maybe...or one of my parents.

There was no point wasting time thinking about it. If I didn't go, I'd be stuck here waiting anxiously for at least a couple years. In the end, I might learn that someone I cared about was dead. Paul or Geese might show up, battered and bruised, and blame me for abandoning them.

Anything could happen, but I had to go. Even if I knew I would regret it.

Before anything else, though, I decided to talk to Elinalise about my decision. If I started with Sylphie and she broke down in tears, my resolve might waver. I wanted to steel myself by breaking the news to my friends first.

I had Elinalise meet me in an empty classroom on the campus.

When I told her what I was planning, she grimaced unhappily. "Look, Rudeus. Didn't I tell you to stay here?"

"Yes, you did. But I—"

"You know, there's still a chance Geese just jumped to conclusions."

"What do you mean?"

"You know the man, Rudeus. He rarely thinks *anything* through before he acts. It's all hunches and intuition with him."

Well, she wasn't wrong about that. Geese liked to keep the facts to himself too, and he wasn't above manipulating people.

"The letter might be one of those cases," Elinalise continued. "For all we know, there's already another letter on its way to us, saying, 'Disregard last message, Zenith is safe,' or something of the sort."

"Yeah. The thought did occur to me."

There was a chance we'd head out there to find that Paul had already rescued my mother. We might even miss each other on the road. It was *possible*, but...

"Think about it for a second," I said. "Isn't it odd that Geese knew where to find me?"

"...What?"

"I sent a letter to Paul a year and a half ago, telling him where I was living. Geese was in the Begaritt Continent as of six months ago, at least. When did *he* learn we were in this city now? How did he send us those letters?"

Getting to Begaritt would take a traveler about a year, and even letters didn't move that quickly. It wasn't like texting on your phone. You were looking at six months minimum, even with an express delivery service. The dates didn't line up.

"The only way Geese could know my location is if he'd met up with my dad and the others. They must have told him where we were."

"Then why was it Geese who wrote to us, instead of Paul?"

"Either Geese decided to send the letter all on his own, or my dad's stubborn pride got in the way."

"Oh. I see..." Elinalise put a hand to her chin, considering this.

In Paul's last letter, he'd assured me that he could handle Zenith's rescue by himself. That would have made it harder for him to ask for my help, even if he needed it.

Elinalise studied me for a few moments and let out a thoughtful "Hmm." But eventually, she nodded. "All right, then. I suppose we'll go together."

I wasn't sure what exactly she'd been thinking about, but her smile looked a little sad. I got the feeling she'd half-expected things to end up this way.

We'd be traveling to the Begaritt Continent together, a party of two.

An hour later, we met up again.

"Right. Let's begin by deciding on our route, shall we?"

Elinalise had returned briefly to her room to retrieve a large map of the world. She'd likely purchased it a few days ago in preparation for her journey. The two of us spread it out on a table, then leaned over it to consider our options.

The map was fairly crude. It didn't have the names of specific roads or the locations of many towns. It just gave you the shape of the continents, the major mountain ranges, and some other basic geographic features.

Elinalise had evidently spent some time studying the possible routes. There were small marks on the map indicating the rough location of Rapan and important

locations we'd be passing on the way there. As I'd anticipated, there were two potential approaches.

"To start, I think we want to arrive at Rapan as quickly as possible." Elinalise was pointing at the shorter route, which would take us from Asura to the northern coast of the continent.

"But the route from the north is more dangerous, right?" I asked.

There were all sorts of risks involved with this approach. We didn't know the roads in Begaritt, and we'd have to travel nearly the entire length of a dangerous continent. I was confident in my ability to slay monsters, but an unfamiliar land could still hold many dangers.

"I seem to remember you can speak the Fighting-God Tongue, Rudeus. Am I correct?"

"Huh? Well, yeah. I'm not exactly fluent, though."

"In that case, we can simply hire a guide and bodyguards once we arrive."

"Ah, I see..."

Thanks to Elinalise's many years of experience on the road, we quickly agreed on our basic route. Having done that, we moved on to planning the details of our journey.

First, we'd buy horses here in Ranoa and load them up with just enough provisions to get us to the Asura Kingdom. We didn't want to bring too much stuff, since that would slow us down. We'd replace our horses when necessary and drive them as hard as possible until we reached the port in Asura.

Once there, we'd buy equipment and provisions. Foodstuffs were hard to find in Begaritt, even when you had money to spare. The prices in Asura might be higher, but it was wise to stock up when we had the chance.

As soon as we had everything we needed, we'd catch the next boat to Begaritt. There, we'd hire a guide, and possibly bodyguards if it seemed prudent. Elinalise would handle these negotiations while I acted as interpreter. After that, we'd just let our guide lead us to the city of Rapan. Once there, we'd find Paul and the others, rescue Zenith, and take the same route back home.

"I've made the trip to Asura more than once, so it won't be an issue," said Elinalise thoughtfully. "The only tricky part is choosing what we bring with us to Begaritt..."

We couldn't carry everything we might want. A carriage could have solved this problem, but Begaritt was apparently covered in deserts, and wagon wheels aren't much good on sand. We'd likely have to buy a steed like the lizard I'd used in the Demon Continent. Maybe they had camels or something.

"I think you can leave those details to me, though. I have more experience in this field," she said.

"Old age does have its benefits, huh?"

"*Don't provoke me, please.*"

I'd spent five years as an adventurer, but compared to a veteran like Elinalise, I was still a fledgling. I ended up leaving a lot of the tough calls in her hands.

"Fortunately, we're both in reasonably good shape," Elinalise said. "We should be able to push ourselves hard when necessary."

"Yeah, I guess so..." I was confident Elinalise could march all day long through the desert, but not quite as certain I'd be able to keep up with her. I'd kept up my training, but there was a chance I'd slow her down a little.

It didn't strike me as a huge problem, though.

“In any case, it’s convenient that they breed horses for long-distance travel in this region. We should be able to find some very suitable options.”

Our initial goal was to reach the port in Asura within two months. It was hard to say how long the crossing to Begaritt would take, but we estimated one month. Neither of us had been to the continent itself, but it was apparently tough terrain, so we penciled in another six months to reach our final destination.

Altogether, we were looking at maybe eight months one way.

That was faster than I’d estimated myself. I felt like there might be ways to cut it down further with creative uses of my magic, but I didn’t want to risk slowing us down with amateurish experiments. The most important thing was getting there in one piece.

We spent some more time discussing other details we’d need to be aware of on our journey. Elinalise cleared up a few things I didn’t understand with remarkable precision and had us hammer out quite a few decisions in advance to prevent any disagreements on the road. It was nice to know we weren’t going to waste any time arguing about what to do next once we got underway.

“The biggest problem...”

After a while, though, she put a hand to her chin and grimaced. I felt like we’d covered most of the important topics, but evidently, I’d overlooked something.

“...is going to be my curse.”

“Oh. Right.”

Unless she slept with men on a regular basis, Elinalise would literally die. On a casual journey, that posed no issue —she could satisfy her needs in whatever town she

wandered into. On longer trips, she often joined a party and found a willing partner. But on a rapid-paced expedition like this, there would be times when none of those methods worked.

Both of us fell silent for a moment.

There was a simple answer, of course. I could sleep with her when necessary. My performance problems were a thing of the past. If a random woman walked up to me asked me to have sex with her, I *could* probably manage just fine.

But I didn't want to betray Sylphie.

"I'm not going to sleep with you on this journey," I said.

"Yes, that wouldn't be a good idea."

"I guess we'll have to stop by brothels or something on our way."

The two of us were going to keep things strictly platonic. I wanted to make that clear up front. Otherwise, we'd probably end up doing it on the road out of sheer convenience.

"What about that magical implement, though?" I asked. "It does weaken the curse's potency, right?"

"Well, if I tried to take it, Cliff would ask why..."

"You're really not going to tell him about this?"

For some reason, Elinalise seemed determined to disappear without a word to Cliff. It felt needlessly cruel to me.

"Look, I really think you need to talk to him first," I said.

"But I..."

"Let me help you out, okay? It'll be all right."

The two of us ended up heading right over to see Cliff that same evening.

When we arrived at his laboratory, Cliff came trotting over to show us the magical diaper in question with a big smile on his face. “Look at this, you two! I’ve made it smaller already! It’s not as heavy as the old one, either. You should be able to wear this for some time without—”

“Cliff. Do you love Elinalise?”

Cutting him off mid-sentence, I put the question as bluntly as I could. Cliff stared at me with a look of blank confusion on his face.

“What? Of course I do.” His tone suggested that I’d asked him the single most obvious question in the world. So far, so good.

“Will you keep loving her, no matter what?”

“Naturally. I love Lise from the bottom of my heart. You’re aware of this, I’m sure.”

“Well, good. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

I explained the situation to Cliff.

I explained that my family was in serious danger. I explained that Elinalise was an old comrade of my dad’s and felt an obligation to help. And I explained that it would be a long journey, on which she’d probably need to sleep with other men. I went into great length, covering every relevant detail.

Cliff listened silently and didn’t interrupt me even once. When it was over, he paused for a moment, then murmured, “I suppose I’d be a burden if I came along.”

Frankly, it was true. But it was hard for me to come out and say so.

As I hesitated, Elinalise stepped in to reply. "Yes, I'm afraid so. You wouldn't be able to endure a journey like this, Cliff."

She might have put it more gently under different circumstances. But this time, she was blunt.

"I see..."

Frowning sadly, Cliff looked down at the ground. I felt a small, painful stab of sympathy in my chest.

What was he feeling right now? Elinalise would have no choice but to sleep with other men on this journey. He understood the situation completely, and he knew she loved him...but it had to be a painful thought.

"You know, Elinalise, maybe we can bring him along?" I said. "He can use Barrier magic and Advanced-tier Divine spells. Even if he doesn't have much stamina, he might come in handy sometimes..."

"It's all right, Rudeus. I wasn't useful in the slightest the last time I tagged along on someone else's adventure. This wouldn't be any different."

As he spoke these words, Cliff stepped forward and handed me the magical diaper.

"Rudeus..."

"Yes?"

"Take care of Lise for me."

To be honest, I'd been expecting more wailing and gnashing of teeth. But it seemed Cliff understood his own strengths and weaknesses very clearly.

"Lise..."

This time, he turned to face Elinalise. Standing on tiptoe, he wrapped his arms around her.

"Cliff..." She embraced him in return.

"When you get back home, let's get married," Cliff said. "I know I haven't cured your curse yet, but I want to buy a house and live there with you. I've made you anxious by waiting this long to say that, haven't I? Maybe you were afraid it was all just talk?"

"Oh, Cliff...but I'm a terrible person. I was planning to go off without even saying a word to you..."

"I'd like to have the ceremony in the Millis style, if you don't mind. I know you're not a member of the church, but..."

Was Cliff deliberately ignoring what she'd just said? Maybe that was for the best. Elinalise sure looked overjoyed.

"Cliff, dearest! I love you so much! More than anyone in the world!"

Just like that, she'd pushed him down onto the floor. Once I saw Cliff's shirt fly into the air, I spun around and quickly left the room. It seemed like they needed some private time at the moment.

I wasn't crazy about the way she'd just promised to get married after "one last job," but maybe I was just too familiar with movie clichés.

I spent the rest of the day going around telling everyone I knew about the situation.

I was going to be leaving for nearly a year and a half, at minimum. If there was real trouble in Rapan, it might be more like two years. That was a long time to just disappear on everyone. I needed to say my goodbyes, at least.

My first destination was the vice principal's office. It was probably best to take care of the formalities sooner rather than later. I found Jenius behind his desk, as always, facing down a sizable pile of paper.

"Hello there, Vice Principal Jenius."

"Ah, if it isn't Mr. Greyrat. Very nice to see you. I've heard you helped Miss Sevenstar complete a rather ambitious experiment?"

"Yeah, that's true. Only because Zanoba and Cliff helped us out, though."

"Ah, I see."

I had no idea how word had gotten around about the summoning experiment. Maybe Jenius was better informed than I thought.

"In any case, what can I do for you today?" he asked.

"Well, I need to take a roughly two-year leave of absence," I said. "I wanted to get the paperwork taken care of right away."

"Two years? That's quite a length of time."

"Yes. I'm afraid I've got quite a rather complex situation to take care of."

"Is that so? Hmm." There was no reason I couldn't explain the details, but Jenius didn't ask. "Very well, then. I'll put your enrollment on hold for the time being. Once you return to us, please come to see me."

"Is a two-year hiatus not going to cause me any issues?"

"We wouldn't allow it for an ordinary undergraduate, but special students like yourself are allowed a bit more flexibility in these matters."

Good thing I was a special student, then. "Thank you very much."

"That's quite all right. The special student system is designed to be as accommodating as possible, after all."

"In that case, could you also put Elinalise Dragonroad's enrollment on hold...as a favor to me? She's not a special student, but she's going to be accompanying me as a bodyguard."

"Ah, I see. All right, I'll figure something out."

Well, that was easy. It's nice to have a friend in the bureaucracy.

Thanking Jenius once again, I left the faculty building behind.

A few minutes later, I spotted Linia and Pursena outside. The two of them waved at me from across the courtyard and trotted over. I took the opportunity to explain the situation to them as well.

"No kidding? Man, it's gonna be boring without you around, Boss."

"We're gonna graduate by the time you get back, so I guess this might be goodbye."

That hadn't occurred to me until now, but it was true. They were sixth-year students. Two years from now, they would probably be back in the Great Forest.

It made me a little sad that I wouldn't get to see them off.

"I guess you're right. That's a shame..."

Come to think of it, the Man-God had encouraged me to "begin a relationship" with one of these two. If I'd chosen to hang around here until the mating season started in two months, things might have taken a turn in that direction.

"What's up, Boss? Do I have something on my face?"

Linia was an attractive girl. Those twitchy cat ears, swaying tail, and healthy thighs were her most distinctive

features, but she had big breasts too. What was she, an E cup? All the beastfolk girls were on the well-endowed side, so that was probably about average. That cocky attitude would probably make her fun in bed too.

"Sniff sniff...whoa! Thinking about goin' a round with us before ya leave, Boss?"

Pursena had her charms, too. Those soft, floppy dog ears and her voluptuous body were her most notable assets. Dog-type beastfolk seemed to have particularly big breasts for some reason; she had to be a G cup. I'd groped those things a few times, so I knew how soft they were. How good would it feel to bury your face in them? Hmm...

"Uh, sorry," I said. "Someone recently advised me to make a move on you two once the mating season comes around. I was just remembering what they said."

"Whoa, seriously? Didn't know you were even interested!"

"Ya never really flirted back, so we figured we weren't your type."

The two of them seemed surprised, but also more than a little amused.

Of course, sleeping with them would have meant cheating on my wife. But from what the Man-God said, it sounded like Sylphie wouldn't have kicked me out of the house over it. Would she really just forgive me for messing around while she was pregnant? Maybe there'd be an ugly fight before things calmed down? Hard to say. Either way, it would supposedly lead to "greater happiness" in the end.

I loved my wife, but I was also a man. The idea of a harem had a certain appeal. I found myself picturing a foursome with Linia, Pursena, *and* Sylphie. In some alternate reality, could that have been my future?

...Nah, probably not. It was never a *real* possibility.

"Linia, Pursena..."

"Yeah?"

"What's up, Boss?"

Linia and Pursena looked at me nervously. I guess I'd spoken in a slightly stern tone of voice.

"Let's stay friends," I said.

The two of them instantly relaxed and shrugged their shoulders.

"Well, if you insist," said Linia, elbowing me in the side. "A guy like you could use a few."

"Friends it is," said Pursena, elbowing me in the *other* side. "Make sure you keep in touch."

We ended up exchanging handshakes before we parted—probably a first for us, actually. Some people like to say it's impossible for men and women to really be friends, but that isn't true. You can be friends with someone you're attracted to; it's just a matter of setting the right boundaries.

"Let's meet again someday, all right?" I said. "Even if it's ten or twenty years from now."

"Sounds good, Boss. We'll both be big shots ten years from now, so you can bow down before us and kiss our shoes!"

"We're gonna *conquer* the Great Forest, man."

I had to smile. Good to know they had ambitions, at least. "Well, I hope you don't take revenge on me or anything."

And so we went our separate ways. If we were lucky, maybe we'd see each other again sooner or later.

A little later, I found myself standing in front of Nanahoshi's laboratory.

I wasn't sure how to break the news to her. Nanahoshi was a lonely girl at heart. For all her outward hostility, I got the sense she was desperate for company. And more importantly, my absence was going to disrupt her research. Her plan to return home would be delayed significantly.

I had to imagine she was going to try to convince me not to go. She might even blackmail me somehow. What was I supposed to do if she threatened to murder Sylphie if I left? Not that I expected her to go *that* nuts...

Letting out a small sigh, I knocked on the front door and waited. The "come in" came a moment later.

Nanahoshi looked up from her desk as I stepped into the room. "What is it? This isn't your usual time..."

"I'm afraid I've got some unfortunate news, actually."

"Unfortunate news?"

Nanahoshi's expression turned suspicious. I spent a few seconds debating how to begin, before deciding that it didn't really matter. Best to get straight to the point.

"I'm going on a lengthy journey. My parents are in danger, and I need to help them. They're in the Labyrinth City of Rapan in the Begaritt Continent. It's going to be about two years before I'm back."

"...What?"

After a moment of silence, Nanahoshi jumped to her feet, knocking her chair backward with a clatter. She pressed her hands down on her desk and stared at me, looking more stunned than anything.

"Rapan? Begaritt? Did you say...two years?"

She repeated the words slowly, as if trying to make sense of them.

"I know I said I'd help you with your experiments, and I do feel terrible about leaving now. But I really need to go."

Nanahoshi's eyes opened wide, and she took a great gulping breath...but instead of shouting, she dropped back into her chair and looked up at the ceiling.

"Two years..." she repeated.

"Once I get back, I promise to help you again as much as I possibly can."

"...Two years..."

Nanahoshi folded her arms and muttered the words to herself a few more times.

She didn't try to stop me or cry out in despair. She just looked up at the ceiling, apparently deep in thought. We spent five extremely awkward minutes like this.

"Well...I guess I'll be going, then," I said.

There wasn't much else I could say here. Nanahoshi knew I'd been helping her out of the goodness of my heart. She probably wanted to change my mind about leaving but was choosing to bite her tongue.

I turned around to leave...

"Hold on just a minute," she said.

And then I stopped in my tracks.

To be honest, I didn't want to continue this conversation. I knew she was just going to try to stop me. But it felt like I owed her a full explanation, so I turned back around.

Nanahoshi was rooting around in the bottom drawer of her desk for some reason. After a moment, she took out some kind of book or journal. She flipped through it to a

specific page, then turned it around to show me. “Take a look at this.”

I leaned forward curiously. Someone had pasted a section from a map onto the page. The map looked familiar enough; it depicted the area around this city, although the scale was a little on the larger side.

Near the top of the map, someone had scribbled the characters N1. Down in the southwestern forest was a red X with the characters B3 above them.

“What is this, Nanahoshi?”

“...”

Nanahoshi was obviously hesitant to explain. But after a few moments, she spoke up.

“It’s a map of ancient ruins that contain teleportation circles. They can be found all across the world.”

Teleportation circles?

“Huh?”

Once again, I peered at the map. At the characters B3 specifically. Could that mean—

“That right there is a teleporter that will take you to the Begaritt Continent.”

“Wha—”

Come to think of it...Nanahoshi had mentioned something like this once, when she was telling me about her travels with Orsted. Something about how he used teleportation circles to jump all around the world...



"But you said...you didn't remember where they were!"

I remembered that part clearly. She'd told me she had no idea where to find them.

"Orsted swore me to secrecy at the start. This is forbidden magic, after all. I agreed readily enough, since I figured I wouldn't be able to remember them anyway."

After a while, though, she'd started making some notes on the teleporters' locations, just in case she ever had to use them. Then she began secretly buying maps or roughly sketching her own. Sometimes she casually asked Orsted where they were or noted the names of nearby cities...and then wrote it all down, instead of trying to memorize it.

Stunned, I flipped through the journal.

It was a rough and incomplete record. There were times when she couldn't procure a map, or they hadn't even visited a town, so she'd penned notes like "Mountains to the left. Roughly three days travel east to reach the river, then two more to reach them."

The letter part of her marks indicated the continent, and the number seemed to be the order in which they'd been accessed. N was the northern region of the Central Continent. S was the southern region, and W the western. DE was the Demon Continent. M was the Millis Continent. They hadn't visited the Divine Continent, apparently...but there were a few Bs for Begaritt.

When she didn't even know what continent they were on, she'd used letters like X or Y instead. It was obvious that she'd put a lot of thought into this thing.

"I've heard about this Rapan place you mentioned," she said. "I remember where it is too. There's a place called Bazaar close to this teleporter, and Rapan is about a month's journey to the north from there. I'm positive."

“It’s that close?”

I flipped back to the page Nanahoshi had shown me first. It covered the area from the city of Sharia to the southwestern forest. The scale was a bit unclear, but it looked like a journey of ten days or so. Maybe even less. And the teleportation circle here would bring us to the point marked B3.

I flipped back to the relevant page. From the B3 teleporter, it looked to be about a week’s journey to the closest town. So if Rapan was only a month away from there...

We were looking at forty-seven days or so, and a ninety-four-day round trip. We could get there and back in just *three months*. Even if we took a month to rescue Zenith, we’d be back home in four.

I could make it back in time. I could be here for the birth of my child.

I’d still miss out on the mating season thing, but that *really* didn’t matter.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked. “Didn’t Orsted tell you to keep this a secret?”

“I won’t deny I’m a bit conflicted, but I owe you a lot after last time. Just don’t share this information with anyone, all right? Teleportation magic is a forbidden art. If word gets around, the ruins will be destroyed by local governments.”

And that would make life less convenient for Orsted. He’d probably get mad at both of us. Just thinking about that guy made me tremble a little. I was going to keep my mouth shut, that much was for sure.

“Thanks, Nanahoshi. This is a huge help.”

"I just want you to get back here as quickly as possible, that's all," she said with a dismissive snort. The girl really was pure tsundere.

Carefully closing the journal, I lowered my head to her in gratitude, then turned to leave.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she called. "On the first page, I sketched the signs they used to mark these ruins and described how you dispel the concealment magic that protects them. Make sure you read that carefully."

"Got it. I owe you one, Nanahoshi!"

"No, you don't. I'm just repaying my debts."

Smiling at her grumpiness, despite myself, I left the laboratory behind.

I immediately headed back to see Elinalise.

We could make this trip much quicker than expected. This was fantastic news. She'd be overjoyed, of course. But we also needed to alter our plans completely. The trip was only going to take a month and a half, after all. We might even be able to bring Cliff along for that!

Slapping my cheeks in an attempt to keep myself from grinning like an idiot, I opened the door to Cliff's laboratory...and was greeted by something that resembled a Renaissance painting of Venus.

"I'm sorry, Rudeus! I can't go after all!"

Elinalise was lounging around wearing nothing but a blanket. And she'd apparently lost her nerve completely.

Her slim, elegant limbs and tastefully draped bosom definitely had a certain classical appeal, but I felt no urge to display her in a museum. I'd never been a big art

appreciation guy in the first place. It did occur to me that she'd make a pretty sexy figurine, though.

Cliff was sitting slumped in a corner of the room, looking a bit like an Egyptian mummy. There was a big smile on his face, but he was obviously passed out. He actually looked more like a masterpiece than his girlfriend. What would you title a statue like this? *Blissful Demise*?

"I can't bear to be parted from Cliff for two whole years!" yelped Elinalise. "I know it's horrible of me, but I simply won't do it!"

Hmm. Well. People do say women are more guided by their emotions, don't they?

"I mean, if you're going, then there's hardly any need for me to tag along too," she babbled. "Your father and I aren't even on good terms. He probably wouldn't want to see my face! Shouldn't I stick around to protect my pregnant granddaughter, in any case?"

"..."

It was hard to remember this was the same woman who'd sternly told me that I should wait here while she took care of everything. I tried my best not to judge her too harshly. She was just returning to reality after a stint in paradise, that was all.

"Well, okay, Elinalise. The thing is, I just found a way that could get us there and back in only three months, but..."

"Huh?!"

Elinalise froze for a moment, staring at me in disbelief.

"What are you talking about, Rudeus?"

I double-checked that Cliff was still asleep, then leaned down to whisper in Elinalise's ear. "So actually, Nanahoshi
—"

“Ah! No, not my ears! They’re sensitive...”

“Can you actually pay attention, please?”

“I-I was only joking, dear.”

I showed Elinalise the journal and gave her a quick explanation, making sure to emphasize that Nanahoshi had sworn us to secrecy. She flipped through it a few times, unable to hide her astonishment.

“Can we really make it there *that* quickly...?”

“That’s right. If we do it this way, I might even make it back in time to see my child born.”

“...This could work.”

A six-week journey wasn’t nearly such a long trip. Elinalise seemed to have snapped back into planning mode, judging from how seriously she was scrutinizing the journal.

“Oh, all right, then,” she said after a moment. “I’ll come along after all.”

Another sudden change of heart, huh?

I *did* understand where she was coming from, though. Two years was a really long time.

“Considering how much quicker this route is, we could bring Cliff with us,” I said.

“...No, we’re leaving him behind.”

“You sure?”

“I doubt he could keep it to himself if he learned about these teleportation circles.”

Really? Cliff was a reasonably trustworthy guy, wasn’t he? Then again...he was probably the type to let secrets slip without even meaning to. Yeah, it was probably better to keep as few people in the know as possible. The more

people we brought into the fold, the more likely word would get out.

Besides, there was trouble waiting for us in Rapan. We wanted to show up with a small, elite group of experienced people.

If I were going to take anyone else along, I'd have preferred someone like Ruijerd. He was both a powerful fighter and as tight-lipped as they come. Badigadi came to mind too. He'd been alive for thousands of years, so it was very possible he already knew about the teleportation circles. And he seemed to be familiar with Orsted, so it would be easy to explain the situation to him.

Unfortunately, I hadn't seen either of those two in some time. No one else came to mind as a likely candidate. Zanoba might be strong in a brawl, but he definitely wasn't a seasoned traveler.

...Come to think of it, if we ran into trouble over there, we could always come back and get more help. Better to play it safe for now, since we didn't know our route. But once we'd made the trip, it wouldn't be so hard to come back and fetch a few additional allies. We'd have to tell them about the teleporters, but that was better than falling short of our goal.

The trip wasn't brief, of course. But even if we had to wait three months for reinforcements, it was at least a viable option.

"All right. Just the two of us for now, then."

"Right. Let's get this over with and get back home as quickly as we can."

At least Elinalise seemed to be on board again. For now.

Finally, I headed home to tell Sylphie.

After gathering her, Aisha, and Norn in the living room, I broke the news right away.

"I think I'm going to go help my parents after all."

Sylphie let out a small, surprised sound, and an anxious expression flashed across her face. I'd taken her off guard, apparently.

But after a moment, she shook her head as if to clear it, and then nodded seriously. "Okay, I understand. I'll take care of things here."

"I'm sorry to disappear like this so suddenly, even though I promised not to," I said.

"You're not breaking your promise, Rudy. This isn't sudden, and you aren't disappearing." Sylphie smiled at me, but it looked forced. No matter what she said, she was obviously struggling with this. It made my heart hurt just to look at her. "Uhm, how long do you think you'll be gone? About two years, right?"

"No. Nanahoshi showed me a way to get there using a teleportation circle. I think I should be back before the baby comes."

I'd already made the decision to tell her about the teleportation thing. If I couldn't trust Sylphie to keep a secret, I couldn't trust anyone.

"Huh?! You're going to *teleport* there? Is that safe?"

She was obviously startled. The anxiety was visible on her face once again.

It made sense that she'd be worried, of course. Both of us had lost a great deal because of the Displacement Incident.

"I can't say for sure just yet," I said. "But Nanahoshi seems to have used these circles personally in the past, so I think it's going to be all right."

"O-okay..."

Sylphie still looked worried, so I pulled her close to me and whispered the next part in her ear. "Don't worry. I'll be back, no matter what."

"Right."

"Sorry about this."

"That's okay..."

Turning my head, I spoke to one of my sisters, who stood nearby. "Aisha."

"Uh, yes...?"

Her expression was even more uncertain than Sylphie's at the moment.

"Can I leave things here to you?"

"I...think so. Mom taught me all about caring for pregnant women."

"If it gets to be too much for you, get help from anyone you can. Don't be shy, and don't try to do everything by yourself. You're a talented kid, but you're still inexperienced. Turn to the adults when you need advice."

"R-right."

Aisha nodded seriously. I did feel a bit nervous about this, but it would probably be all right. There was no perfect solution here.

"Norn."

"Yes, Rudeus?"

"If Sylphie and Aisha get overwhelmed, try to step in to help them, please. Maybe just talk to them when they're

feeling stressed. You know how hard it can be to face that sort of thing alone, right?"

"Of course!"

"And try to keep up with your studies while I'm gone too."

"I'll do my best!"

Norn seemed to be very determined to play her role in this properly. Hopefully that wouldn't get her butting heads with Aisha or anything.

Well, then. What did that leave? Was there anything else I needed to say to them?

"...Oh, right. Maybe we should decide on a name for the kid before I go."

I was planning to make it back in time, but you never knew what might happen. It couldn't hurt to get this settled beforehand.

What sort of a name would be best? People tended to like cringe-inducingly "cool" names here, so...hmm. If it was a girl, maybe Ciel or Sion... If it was a boy, maybe Nero or Wallachia...

Nah, this wasn't a video game.

Our names were Rudeus and Sylphie, so we could sort of combine parts of them. Maybe something like Sirius if it was a boy, or Lucie for a girl. That was kind of cliché, though... Maybe I should just ask Paul for advice.

After thinking all this over for a few seconds, I finally noticed everyone was looking at me with strange expressions on their faces.

"R-Rudy...you want to *name* the baby?"

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Rudeus..."

They seemed genuinely shocked. Aisha even had tears welling up in her eyes. Was the idea that odd? I didn't remember any rules about not naming kids before their birth.

"If you name a child before you leave on a journey, you'll never come back home..." Sylphie looked more anxious than ever before. Apparently, I'd tripped over a "death flag" unique to this world. One that I had no memory of.

No, wait. I remembered now. Was this about that thing from the story of Perugius?

One of Perugius' companions was an Emperor-tier Fire mage named Feroze Star, known as the "Fortunate Man." Feroze decided to name his unborn son before departing for the front lines, just in case he didn't make it back safely, choosing to pass the boy his own name. In the battle that followed, however, Feroze was defeated by the Demon King Ryner Kaizel, and he died thinking of the child he'd never live to meet. His son, inheriting his famous father's legacy, went on to become a magnificent magician in his own right.

That was how the tale went, at least. I'd also heard a version where the kid actually turned out to be a good-for-nothing nobody. At any rate, the story was so well-known that everyone now thought naming an unborn child before setting off on a journey would bring terrible disaster. It wasn't like that decision had actually caused Feroze's death, of course, but people can be superstitious about these things.

"Uh, okay, then. You think we should wait until I get back?"

"I-I don't know... Maybe..."

"But I kind of want to have a say in this, you know? And there's always the worst-case scenario..."

“Don’t even talk about that, Rudy.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Still, this was my first-born child we were talking about. That didn’t feel completely real yet, but I wanted to at least participate in choosing a name.

“Ahem.”

Aisha cleared her throat meaningfully. She’d clearly come up with some sort of proposal.

“How about this, brother dear? If the child is born before you make it back, we’ll call them Rudeus Junior *temporarily*. Once you’re back home, you’ll pick a proper name. We can make the Rudeus into his middle name, like the famous North God Kalman.”

Rudeus Junior, huh? Well, it wasn’t too unusual to give a child their parent’s name in this world. And if we ended up going with Lucie, it would turn into something like Lucie Rudeus Greyrat...

That didn’t sound too bad to me. It *did* feel a little embarrassing, since I still associated names like that with wealthy aristocrats, but it seemed more common here.

Hm? Wait a second, though.

What if it was a girl, and I never made it back? Would she be stuck with Rudeus Junior forever? What if she got picked on? What if she turned into a furious little monster who had to beat everyone senseless to defend her stupid name?!

I tried to convince myself that was unlikely. The world didn’t need another “Mad Dog.”

...Well, whatever. Just another reason to make it back home safely.

“That sounds good to me, I guess. Sylphie...?”

“Yes?”

“Uhm...”

I felt like I had more to say to her, but I couldn’t find the right words. I had the feeling anything I could say would come out sounding weirdly ominous.

“Come here.”

So instead, I just walked up to her and put my hands on her shoulders.

“Huh? Ah...”

After a moment of confusion, she closed her eyes, lifted her chin, and folded her hands in front of her chest. She was actually trembling a little. This wasn’t exactly a first for us, but I wasn’t sure we’d ever done it this ceremoniously before.

I glanced over at my sisters. Aisha was leaning forward eagerly. Norn had covered her face with her hands but was peeking between her fingers anyway.

I shot the both of them a quick wink. Norn instantly closed her hands over her eyes, but Aisha winked back happily. What a little rascal. Did she really want to see a kiss scene that badly?

Well, it couldn’t hurt to indulge her just this once. This was a special occasion.

I kissed Sylphie deeply—and listened to my little sister squealing softly in delight.

Chapter 9: To Begaritt

ELINALISE AND I revised our travel plans in a hurry.

First of all, we'd purchase a horse and ride it together to the forest where the teleporter was hidden. We'd then warp ourselves over to the Begaritt Continent.

If Nanahoshi's memory was accurate, this would deposit us about a week's journey south of an oasis town called Bazaar. Unfortunately, we'd be traveling through an all-but-barren desert. Nanahoshi had gotten so exhausted that Orsted ended up having to carry her on his back. We'd have to show up well prepared.

I had my magic, so we wouldn't be lacking for ice-cold water at any time. That alone would make things significantly simpler. We didn't have a map to the town of Bazaar, but Elinalise had confidence in her ability to navigate unfamiliar terrain. She claimed that elves could travel through even the densest of forests without ever losing their way.

I felt the need to mention that a desert wasn't very much like a forest, but that just earned me an angry lecture about her many years of experience as an adventurer. Given how confident she seemed, I had to assume we'd be okay.

Once we made it to Bazaar, we could hire a guide to our final destination. Rapan was roughly a month to the north, and that was a lengthy journey. Elinalise could keep us moving in the right direction, but it would be much faster to find a local who knew the easiest route.

After arriving in Rapan, we'd rescue my mother as quickly as possible, then return home by the same route. It

would mean telling more people about the teleportation circles, but we didn't have much choice. I couldn't tell my parents to take the long way back.

From what we knew, Paul was traveling in a party of six people. Probably seven, assuming he'd joined up with Geese. We'd just have to swear all of them to secrecy.

Incidentally, I'd made sure to warn Sylphie and my sisters not to tell anyone about the teleporters. Just to drive the point home, I mentioned that a very scary guy who could beat down Ruijerd in an instant might get *really* angry with them if they blabbed.

With our basic plan nailed down, Elinalise and I got to work on the details.

I already had my gear sorted out. I'd be bringing my trusty staff Aqua Heartia and a robe that Sylphie had picked out for me. The only other thing that came to mind was the summoning spell that Nanahoshi had given me earlier. I didn't know when it might prove useful, but I decided to bring ten copies of the scroll along with me. I could make a new printing plate in a single day, but I didn't want to be lugging ink around in the desert. The scrolls were much lighter and less fragile. And if I ended up needing more, I could always try to buy some ink in Rapan.

On that note, I didn't have any local currency. I wasn't even sure what kind of money they used over there. It was probably easiest to just bring something I could easily exchange for cash.

Other than that, I just needed food rations for the journey. This was my first trip to Begaritt, so I had no idea what sort of tools or equipment I might want. I'd have to obtain them locally as the need arose.

Since our journey was only going to last six weeks now, I had some free space in my bags to work with. I could technically bring along some things I didn't really *need*.

That didn't mean it was smart to weigh myself down with nonsense, though. It was probably best to travel light. We'd be reaching Bazaar in a week, so it wasn't like we'd be wandering the wilderness for long. Still, I decided to bring along a book that contained some specifics on teleportation magic, given the potential risks we were facing. I knew Orsted had used these things in the past, but that didn't mean it would be safe for us.

I headed back to the faculty offices, flattered Jenius for a while, and got permission to borrow a few titles from the library on a long-term basis. I picked up the book I had in mind, *An Exploratory Account of the Teleportation Labyrinth*, and grabbed a volume called *The Begaritt Continent and the Fighting-God Tongue* while I was at it. I felt like that one might come in handy if I had trouble making myself understood.

I seemed to remember that Ginger knew a thing or two about horses, so I asked her to accompany me to a local stable. I took the chance to let Zanoba know about the situation.

"I see! You'll be able to return in roughly half a year, then?"

"Yeah. I can't explain how, though."

"Is that so? Hmm...you know, I could order Ginger to go along with you, if you'd like."

"Don't be ridiculous, Zanoba." Why would I go out of my way to make an enemy of the poor woman?

"Hrm. Well all right, then."

"Don't worry about me, okay? Just worry about looking out for Sylphie and my sisters."

"There's no need to worry yourself on that account. Perhaps I could even assign Ginger to protect them in your absence."

I snorted. "Is it just me, or are you trying to get her out of your hair?"

Zanoba glanced over in Ginger's direction, then leaned over to whisper in my ear. "The woman is something of a nag, Rudeus. Ever since I was a child, she's lectured me about every single mistake I make. And lately, she's been just as strict with Julie as well. It's getting tedious."

The guy sounded like a college student complaining about his mother. I guess he was in his mid-twenties, come to think of it. I could sort of understand how he felt. Sort of.

Mostly, though, I just felt bad for Ginger. She was still young herself. The girl was wasting her twenties taking care of an oversized baby.

"What do you think about this, Julie?" I asked.

Our junior pupil had tagged along on the horse-shopping expedition. I'd have to encourage her to keep at her training while I was gone. We could resume the Ruijerd figure project after I returned.

"Miss Ginger just...points out Master Zanoba's...bad habits."

"Well, there we go. Better shape up, Zanoba. You need to set a good example for her."

"Hrm..."

Yeah, this really did remind me of a mom barging into the filthy apartment her two kids had been filling up with junk. It was kind of heartwarming, in a way.

"Anyway. Make sure you keep practicing like you promised while I'm gone, okay, Julie?"

"Yes, Grandmaster. I'll do my best."

Julie wasn't stumbling over her words much at all lately. We had Ginger to thank for that as well.

At this point, the woman in question came back over to us, leading a horse along by the reins. "Here you are, Sir Rudeus. I believe this one should serve your needs."

"Ooh..."

The horses in these parts tended to be bulky creatures, since they had to push their way through the snow most of the year. Up close, this one almost looked like a different species from the slender racehorses I was familiar with. It wouldn't sprint as fast, but it looked like it could keep going for days at a time. Horses in this world were monstrously strong in general.

For no particular reason, I decided it was worthy of the name Matsukaze.

"Thank you, Ginger. You've been a great help."

"That's quite all right. It was no real trouble."

"Want me to ask Zanoba to do something for you? Maybe massage your shoulders?"

"Sir Rudeus...I have great respect for you, but I wish you'd show a bit more—"

"Right, right. Sorry. It was just a joke."

Judging from the way she was glaring at me, Ginger didn't find it very funny.

Anyway. I had my horse, and I'd let the most important people in my life know what was going on. Was I forgetting someone? Maybe. I felt like I'd spoken with all my friends,

though. Badigadi still wasn't around, but there wasn't anything I could do about that.

Well, whatever. I'd checked every item off my to-do list, and I'd sworn everyone who knew about the teleportation circles to secrecy. We were good to go.

On the day of our departure, my wife and two sisters saw me off at the front door.

"I'll be back before you know it, Sylphie."

"Rudy..."

Sylphie threw her arms around me with tears in her eyes. I'd gotten accustomed to holding her over the last six months. Her body was small and radiated warmth. It felt like hugging an affectionate little animal sometimes.

But today, her shoulders were trembling, and she was sniffling softly. This wasn't making it too easy to leave, honestly.



...Should I just stay behind after all? Maybe I could wait for my child to be born before I help the old man.

I mean, think about it. Normally, it would have taken me almost a year just to get out there. Couldn't I stay home for another seven months and leave after my child's born? The journey should only take six weeks now, so I could still make it on schedule.

I wasn't strong enough to keep the thoughts from flitting through my mind. But at the end of the day, Geese had been desperate enough to send an express message from the Begaritt Continent. Those services weren't cheap, even for the briefest of letters; it wasn't something you did unless you had to. Time was probably of the essence.

And if I left now, I could still make it back to see my child be born. I just had to think of it as a kind of business trip, basically.

Wiping away Sylphie's tears, I spoke to my sisters, who were standing awkwardly behind her in the foyer. "Aisha, Norn, I'll see you later. Take care of things for me, okay?"

I wasn't entirely sure myself what that was supposed to mean, but the two of them nodded emphatically.

"Don't worry, brother dear. I'll keep matters well in hand here."

"Of course, Rudeus! Be careful out there!"

I nodded. "Good to hear. Try not to fight with each other, okay?"

They replied "Yes!" in perfect unison. I couldn't help smiling at the grimly serious expressions on their faces.

"Sylphie!"

Elinalise chose this moment to ride up dramatically on our horse. He was carrying two full weeks of provisions on

his back, but didn't even seem to feel the weight. Our Matsukaze really was a beast.

"Be brave, dear, you'll be all right! You don't need a husband hanging around to give birth, anyway. Trust me, I'm speaking from experience on this one."

"I guess so," said Sylphie with a weak smile. "You be careful out there too, Grandma."

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'll manage just fine."

Elinalise flipped her hair upward in a gesture of supreme confidence. The woman *could* be cool when she wanted to. She looked like a lady knight from a fairy tale or something.

It was a shame I'd seen her throwing a tantrum just the other day. The memory of that kind of tainted the whole experience.

Well, I guess everyone has their weak spots, right?

I certainly wasn't lacking a few of my own.

"Okay, then. We'd better get on the road."

Not wasting any more time, I hopped up behind Elinalise. She was a slender woman, but she sat ramrod straight in the saddle. It was kind of reassuring to know she had the reins.

It wasn't *unpleasant* having my arms around her either. I felt a little stab of guilt, but...hey, I was only borrowing her from Cliff for a little while, right?

"Rudy?"

Sylphie tilted her head curiously at me. Not that I was doing anything fishy! Really! I had to hold on tight so I wouldn't fall off—that was all.

"All right, everyone. See you soon."

At last, our journey got underway.

It took five days for us to reach the forest to the southwest of Sharia.

During that first leg of the journey, we were accompanied by an adventurer we'd hired from the guild. He'd be responsible for taking our horse back to the city afterward. Horses would only slow you down in a dense forest, and we didn't know the size of the teleporter we'd be using. It would be convenient to have a beast of burden for our travels across the desert, but it was smarter to just procure one over there. We'd probably find something better suited to the local climate.

All in all, it made more sense to have someone just escort the horse back to Sharia for us. He hadn't come cheap, so I had every intention of keeping him.

I'd never learned how to ride, so I mostly spent the trip clinging to Elinalise from behind. Of course, I did keep myself occupied...in a perfectly platonic way. I spent an entire day charging up that magical diaper Cliff had created. This did involve wrapping my arms around Elinalise's waist, so I caught our hired sword shooting me a few envious glances.

After arriving at the forest, we said our goodbyes to Matsukaze. Hopefully he'd hit it off with Aisha and the others.

Now we had a forest to investigate. I forget exactly what its name was. Something like the Lumen Forest, maybe? A word that meant "stomach" in some language or the other.

That choice made sense once you were inside the place. The vegetation was incredibly dense; there were so many tall, old trees that their branches blocked out the sun. Kind of a gloomy place, really. The ground was thick with roots, so it often felt like you were walking on top of a lumpy, uneven wooden floor. You had to watch your step constantly. The bigger trees had much larger roots, and in some places, they even formed natural staircases of sorts. It was almost like an outdoor dungeon.

Even an experienced ranger could easily get lost in a place like this. And once you wandered off the path, it would be all too easy to become a monster's prey, or to slip and fall off a wooden "platform." Many human bodies had no doubt been digested by this forest over the centuries.

It didn't look like any woodcutters came out here too often. Maybe the monsters here were relatively strong? Or numerous? Or maybe there were other forests in the area that were just more conveniently located. It was probably some combination of the three, honestly.

Just to be clear, the woodcutters of this world weren't anything to scoff at. A team of lumberjacks were often more organized and capable than an average band of adventurers. Forests offered plentiful lumber, but they were also home to many monsters. Cutting down a single tree was a dangerous task. People had to form teams—and sometimes even hire bodyguards. A typical expedition involved some serious combat on top of the actual woodcutting, so the woodcutters' guild was home to plenty of formidable characters.

Besides, their work had a vital function in this world. If trees didn't get cut down on a regular basis, you'd eventually get swarms of dangerous Treants.

"You remember the formation we discussed earlier, Rudeus?" Elinalise said. "Let's take our positions."

“Got it.”

Still, this wasn’t nothing to veteran adventurers like us. We were alert, of course, but calm. Elinalise took the lead, and I followed behind her at a set distance.

As you might expect from an elf, she knew how to navigate this terrain. And thanks to her excellent hearing, we had advance warning whenever enemies tried to ambush us.

“Three monsters at two o’clock!”

“Got it.”

On command, I fired off a Stone Cannon ahead and to my right. The projectile struck a green boar just as it broke through the foliage, sending it flying backward in a spray of blood. Its two companions immediately turned tail and fled.

Elinalise was handling the “search” part, and I was on “destroy” duty. So far, we were wiping out every threat before they even got close to us. We hadn’t engaged in any real combat so far, which was fine by me. Elinalise seemed to be guiding us around dangerous areas where animals were congregating in larger numbers. This was evidently a skill she’d picked up over the years, rather than some sort of natural elven instinct.

“I think I found it. This is the monument we were looking for, right?”

After some time, Elinalise spotted the thing we were here to find. It was a flat stone slab with a symbol carved on its surface, standing in front of a thick wall of vegetation. I’d resigned myself to the possibility we’d be combing this forest for two or three days, but we’d managed to find the thing before the sun set. Maybe the woman had skill points in Find Secrets or something.

The carving on the stone was familiar to me from the monuments to the Seven Great Powers. It bore the crest of the Dragon God—a sharp, angular pattern made up mostly of triangles. It reminded me a little of the magic symbol that appeared on some anime character's forehead when he powered up, although the specific details were totally different. Maybe they were both supposed to be representations of a dragon's face.

Still...had I seen this crest on its own before?

Oh, right. It looked a lot like the symbol on those papers I'd found in the basement of my house. There were some subtle differences, but they were definitely similar. Maybe the man who created that killer robot had some connection to the Dragon God?

Well, there were probably a bunch of similar symbols out there. In my old world, lots of countries had similar flags.

"Is something the matter?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

Elinalise had noticed me studying the symbol at length, but I decided not to pursue this line of thought any further. We had other priorities at the moment.

"I'll get started on removing the barrier, then," I said.

"All right." Elinalise turned around to watch my back while I worked.

I placed a hand on the stone's surface and opened Nanahoshi's journal to the page where she'd written her notes. There was a specific incantation I was supposed to use.

"The wyrm lived only for his ideals. None could escape the reach of his mighty arms. He was the second to die—a Dragon General, his scales green and gold, his life the most

ephemeral of dreams. In the name of the Holy Dragon Emperor Shirad, I break his seal."

The instant the final word left my mouth, I felt mana flowing from my arm into the tablet, and the world began to distort before my eyes. The air itself seemed to swirl strangely for a moment; when this passed, the thick wall of trees and plants in front of me had disappeared, leaving a stone building in its place.

"Whoa!"

"I've never seen an enchantment like this," said Elinalise, staring at the structure in astonishment.

It wasn't anything I'd seen before, either. But the way that tablet had sucked mana out of me was familiar. The thing was probably an oversized, stationary magical implement. If we broke it in half, we'd probably find a bunch of complex magic circles etched inside.

Still, this incantation struck me as a Dragon God original, what with all the, uh...references to various dragons. That Holy Dragon Emperor Shirad guy was one of the Five Dragon Generals from the old stories, right?

This incantation seemed to be incomplete, given that it lacked the name of the spell itself. But if you had the entire thing, maybe it would allow you to imitate the power of this tablet and dispel magical barriers freely. It seemed disturbingly plausible.

"Let's get going, then."

"Uh, all right."

I kind of wanted to uproot this tablet and take it home with me, but that seemed like the sort of thing that might get me murdered by Orsted. I'd had enough of *that* for one lifetime.

The building before us was a squat, single-story structure. Vines of ivy ran along its walls, and there were places where the stones had crumbled away over the years.

"Hmm...the place looks like a pretty typical ancient ruin, doesn't it?"

"I've seen a few labyrinths with entrances that looked a bit like this," Elinalise said. "Oh, right. You don't have any experience with labyrinths, do you, Rudeus?"

"Nope. I've explored some old ruins and such, I guess, but not an actual labyrinth."

"In that case, make sure you follow close behind me. Only step where I do."

"Sure, I can do that. But, uh, I don't think this place is a labyrinth, is it?"

"It's better to be safe than sorry."

Fair enough. There might be traps in there, for all we knew.

Still, Elinalise wasn't a rogue or anything. Was she even capable of finding traps? Just to be on the safe side, I activated my Eye of Foresight. It wasn't much of an advance warning system, but it might help me cope a little better with any sudden ambushes.

"Okay then, Rudeus. Let's go. Be ready to cover me if things turn ugly."

"Got it."

Cautiously, Elinalise and I stepped inside the stone ruin together.

"..."

The interior was also made of stone. Here and there, you could see vines or tree roots poking through the walls. A classic "forest ruins" situation, basically.

It wasn't that large a structure, though. In fact, it looked like there were only four rooms. We moved through them slowly, making sure to investigate every corner.

The two rooms nearest to the entrance were completely empty spaces about seven square meters in size. The third had a small closet in one corner; when we opened the door, we found winter clothing in a man's size stored inside. These clearly hadn't been sitting here for decades. Somebody had changed their clothes here relatively recently. And by somebody, I mean Orsted.

The teleportation circle was supposedly going to drop us in the middle of a desert, and this region was blanketed in heavy snows for a good part of the year. I had to imagine it would be hard to buy appropriate clothing for that weather in Begaritt, which was probably why he'd left these here for his next visit.

If I'd known we could leave things behind like this, I could have carried a little more luggage. There was no point crying over spilled milk, though.

"What's the matter? Is there some reason you're staring at those clothes?"

"Nah. Just wondering if there's anything we could leave behind for our return trip."

"Hmm...I don't think so. We'd basically be throwing supplies away if we left them here."

To be sure, the food we had with us wasn't going to stay edible if we left it sitting here for months. Barrier or no barrier, there were probably bugs in here.

"Let's be on our way, then," said Elinalise, turning toward the exit.

"Right."

In the fourth and final room, we found a set of stairs leading down into darkness.

“Oh, my. Now *this* looks suspicious.”

Elinalise scrutinized the area around the stairs and checked every corner of the room like an FPS player clearing an area. I guess staircases were popular places to set traps.

“Okay, then...I think we’re all right.”

In the end, though, she didn’t find anything. I wasn’t too surprised. If someone wanted to trap this place, they’d probably have put a few at the entrance too.

“I’ll head down first. Watch my back, Rudeus.”

“Got it.”

Elinalise took the stairs down very slowly and carefully. I made sure to follow exactly in her footsteps. Oddly, the ruins didn’t get any darker as we descended.

The reason for this became clear when we reached the bottom of the stairs.

“...Well, there it is.”

There was a huge magic circle on the floor in front of us—as big as one of the rooms upstairs. In size, at least, it was comparable to the one I’d been trapped in back in the royal palace of Shirone. And it was emitting a steady bluish-white light.

“This would be the teleportation circle, then?”

“I’d have to assume so, yes.”

Just to be sure, I took Nanahoshi’s journal from my bag and reviewed her notes. The thing in front of us looked very similar to her sketch of a two-way teleporting circle. There were some minor differences, but all the major features were there. All we had to do was step into this thing, and we should theoretically find ourselves in the Begaritt Continent.

Elinalise, however, seemed to be in no hurry to try it out. She was staring at the magic circle with a hesitant expression on her face.

“Something the matter, Elinalise?”

“I have some rather painful memories involving teleporting, that’s all.”

Painful memories? Was she talking about some incident from her days as an adventurer?

“Yeah, well...you’re not the only one.”

“Ah. I suppose not.”

Elinalise shook her head and looked at the magic circle again. This time, there was a grimly determined expression on her face.

“If this thing drops us in the middle of the ocean,” I added helpfully, “let’s make sure Nanahoshi regrets it.”

“All right,” said Elinalise. “I’ll hold her down while you jam it in.”

“Could we go with something less sexual?”

“Sexual? I didn’t specify *what* you’d be jamming into *where*, dear. You could always just stick a finger into her nose or something. You’ve got a rather dirty mind.”

“Sticking your finger into a girl’s nose still sounds kind of sexual to me, actually.”

“Does it really? Hmm. I’ll have to see if Cliff wants to try it later.”

“Don’t blame me if he takes you up on that.”

Smiling, Elinalise took me by the hand. Her grip was strong, despite her slender fingers. This was the hand of an adventurer. It was also a little warm and sweaty, and it made my heart start to beat a little faster.

Of course, I had Sylphie, and Elinalise had Cliff. If something happened between us, we'd both be committing adultery. And it wasn't like we had feelings for each other in that sense, anyway.

"I hope you're not misunderstanding, Rudeus. It's important for us to be in physical contact when we teleport, if we want to make sure it keeps us together."

"Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry about that." *Whoops. That's kind of cringeworthy.*

I wasn't a virgin anymore, so I had no excuse to keep making these kinds of mistakes.

"There I go again, seducing my granddaughter's husband without even trying to," Elinalise sighed. "It's simply criminal to be this beautiful, I suppose."

"Yeah. Better atone for your misdeeds by filing for divorce."

"Hey! Come on, now you're just being rude."

That was better. If we turned the awkwardness into a joke, it defused the sexual tension. Elinalise really knew how to handle these sorts of situations.

"Okay, then, shall we go?"

"Let's do it."

The two of us stepped into the teleportation circle together.

Chapter 10: Natural Predator

TEPORTING FELT a bit like snapping awake out of a doze. Maybe I'd actually lost consciousness for a moment.

Looking beside me, I saw Elinalise was just as startled.

"I guess we're here," she said after a moment.

"Well, maybe..."

We were still standing in a stone ruin, just as we had been before. And the chamber didn't look particularly different at first glance.

After a few seconds, though, I started to notice small piles of sand in the corners, and a lack of vines on the walls. The stone was tinged a slightly browner color, too. We'd been teleported *somewhere*, all right.

I stepped gingerly out of the magic circle.

My body seemed to be functioning normally. I had my belongings too. And I hadn't swapped minds with Elinalise or anything.

Once we stepped completely out of the teleporter, it began to emit that bluish-white light once again. Apparently, it was ready and waiting to return us to the other side.

That was convenient and all, but I didn't see any magic crystals powering this thing. How exactly was it getting the mana that it needed? Maybe it had a power source buried under the floor? What if it was somehow absorbing mana from the air around it? If there was a way to do *that*, I really wanted to know it.

"Oh, wait. We should check to make sure we can get back to the other side, right?"

"That seems prudent, yes."

This was *supposedly* a two-way teleporter, but we had no way of knowing if it worked properly or had any limitations. If we'd taken a one-way trip out here, we'd need to hoof it back home the hard way. That would put an end to my plan to make it back before Sylphie gave birth.

"I guess I'll—"

"No, I'll go. If I'm not back in a few minutes, you can go on without me," said Elinalise, pushing me back gently. "I don't fancy the idea of telling Paul that you disappeared because of a malfunctioning teleporter."

"Well, all right then. I'll leave it to you."

It didn't matter that much either way at this point. I wasn't even sure we were on the right continent yet, for one thing.

"Okay, sit tight."

Elinalise hopped back into the magic circle and abruptly disappeared. I thought I caught a brief glimpse of her being sucked down into the floor.

This was my first time actually seeing someone get teleported, come to think of it. Did these things move you through the *ground* somehow?

"..."

For the moment, there wasn't much to do but wait. I trusted Nanahoshi's memory, and from what she said, you didn't need some magic incantation or special technique to use these things properly. There was a chance Orsted had used some sort of magical implement, but we'd made out here easily enough. I wanted to think the return trip would be just as smooth.

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Then fifteen.

"She's sure taking her time... Hmm?"

Just as I was beginning to get concerned, Elinalise finally showed up again. It was like watching the teleport happen in reverse: she popped up out of the floor in a fraction of a second.

She looked a bit woozy for a moment, but nodded when she met my gaze. "We're all right, Rudeus. It works just fine."

"Really? I was starting to get worried. You took longer than I expected."

"What? I didn't spend more than a few seconds on the other side."

The teleportation process wasn't literally instant, then. But a few minutes to take a trip halfway across the world wasn't a bad deal. It sounded like we were looking at maybe seven minutes of lag per trip.

Come to think of it, I'd heard something about the Fittoan Displacement Incident that seemed relevant. There had supposedly been an odd delay between the disappearances and when people reappeared elsewhere. Was it Sylphie who'd told me that?

Teleportation might be a rapid means of travel, but it wasn't instantaneous. Maybe it was more like a Boson Jump.

"Well, no big deal. You made it back, and that's what matters."

"I suppose so."

If these things were too dangerous, Orsted wouldn't be using them. And we'd at least confirmed that we could get back home.

"Shall we be on our way, then?"

Feeling somewhat reassured, I made my way over to the stone stairs leading upward.

The instant we reached the first floor, I noticed a sharp increase in the temperature.

The air was brutally hot. It didn't feel too humid, at least, which made sense if we were in the middle of a desert, like we were supposed to be.

The first floor looked virtually identical to the ruin we'd left behind in the forest. The main difference was the sand carpeting the floors and the lack of vegetation on the walls. I noticed a few footprints here and there. Those were Orsted's, presumably. If we bumped into each other, I'd have to grovel at his feet faster than he could kill me.

There were four rooms here as well, and the layout was identical. In one of them, however, we found a few thick white capes and water canteens. More of Orsted's possessions, presumably.

"What should we do about our footsteps? Think I should erase them?"

"Are you worried about that Orsted person? I think it's rather unlikely that we'll run into him..."

True, but I was still kind of scared. Maybe I should leave behind a message? Tell him Nanahoshi had told me about this place, and I was only using it because of a family emergency? Promise to keep it secret, and beg him not to be angry with me?

...Then again, there was no telling when he'd even be here next. He might never find out we'd been here in the first place, in which case, leaving a letter would just be asking for trouble. After a few moments, I decided not to bother.

We took some time to look through the ruin, just in case, but there wasn't anything else of note. Orsted wasn't lurking on the premises either, of course.

After exploring the ruin thoroughly, we set foot outside for the first time.

It was hot out there. Very hot. The word *hot* was kind of inadequate, to be honest. The wind actually hurt my face.

All I saw in front of me was a sea of rolling sand dunes. It looked like one of the pictures I'd seen of the Sahara back in my previous life.

The sun was already starting to set. Wasn't it better to travel at night in the desert, though? Wait, no. Maybe it was *more* dangerous because the temperature would drop below freezing? Not that things necessarily worked the same in this world...

...I seemed to remember that desert-dwelling monsters were more active at night. If we wandered around in the dark and got ambushed, things could get dicey.

"What do you think we should do, Elinalise?" I asked.

"We won't get far before the sun sets if we set out now. It's a little early, but I think we ought to take the chance to rest with a roof over our heads."

We ended up deciding to spend the night in the ruins.

The night proved just as frigid as I'd feared.

I'd gotten used to cold up in the north. But the rapid way the temperature shifted here made it harder to endure.

We were okay for the moment, since we had thick stone walls to shelter behind. But we'd have to think about how to stay warm when we were camping outdoors. Maybe I

could make us some temporary shelter with magic? Earth Fortress was a nice spell for that...but you had to keep feeding it mana, or it would crumble. If I tinkered with it a little, maybe I could create a simple igloo-style structure that would hold itself together. Then we could make a fire inside to warm ourselves up. Yeah, that seemed like a plan.

For tonight, though, we decided to just wrap ourselves up in our sleeping bags on the floor. I took some time to recharge Elinalise's magical implement before turning in. This involved putting both my hands on the diaper to channel mana into it. I felt like a bit of an idiot, to be honest.

"Rudeus," Elinalise murmured, "if you find yourself running out of mana, you can put off recharging this thing for a while."

"But if I stop feeding it mana, you won't be able to contain yourself, right?"

"Your magic is going to be crucial every time we enter combat. We have to prioritize your ability to fight."

The monsters on the Begaritt Continent weren't, on average, as fierce as those on the Demon Continent. But some were supposedly of comparable strength. Letting down our guard might prove fatal.

"Don't worry about it. This isn't much of a strain on my mana supply, honestly."

"Really? I swear, your mana's like a bottomless well..."

"Kind of like your sex drive."

"Oh, I wouldn't say I'm *that* horny, dear."

If I slacked off on filling this thing up with mana, and Elinalise went into seductress mode, we'd be in trouble. I probably wouldn't be able to resist if she attacked me. There were too many convenient excuses available: *Just this once.*

It'll be our little secret. I tried to stop her, but she forced the issue.

And if I gave in to that kind of pressure, it might end up ruining our lives. I mean, what if she got pregnant? Cliff would hate me for the rest of my life, and Sylphie might never forgive me either. Not to mention what my little sisters might think.

I just couldn't imagine a single good thing coming of me sleeping with Elinalise. If we really couldn't stop ourselves, maybe I could at least convince her to stop at oral...

Ugh, no. I shouldn't even be thinking like that.

I was obviously a little backed up myself at this point. I'd been spending a lot of time over the last week with my arms wrapped around Elinalise. We hadn't done anything remotely sexual, but you can't blame a young guy for getting a little horny. I'd have to see to my own needs tonight when I was on guard duty or something.

"Well, let's go to sleep, shall we? I imagine we'll be moving through this desert for some time, so we ought to be saving our strength."

"Yeah, you're right."

Much as I wanted to conserve my energy, though, I needed to expend some tonight. Sometimes it isn't easy being a man.

Later that night, as I was lying inside the ruins, a sweet smell wafted through the air.

Instantly, I felt my heart start pounding in my chest.

Opening my eyes, I saw Elinalise grimacing in her sleep, with her sword clutched in her arms.

I found myself studying her pale neck and slender hands. Her face looked a bit like a more grown-up version of Sylphie's. She was tall and willowy too. Especially below the waist, her figure was about as perfect as I'd ever seen.

And wasn't she supposedly really, really good in the sack, too...?

"Hah...haah..."

All of a sudden, my log had grown into a towering oak, and my thoughts were clouded with desire.

"Mm..."

Elinalise wriggled around in her sleep. Her blanket slipped off, and I got a good look at her thighs and tight leather shorts.

The woman had a nice butt. I wanted to give it a squeeze. Without consciously meaning to, I reached out. I wanted to touch her very, very badly.

My fingers reached her thighs. They really were amazingly slender.

Elinalise let out a little sound and parted her legs slightly. Was she trying to seduce me or what?

It felt increasingly impossible for me to stop myself. Why did it matter, anyway? We could make it a one-time thing. She wasn't going to refuse me. She'd keep it to herself. It wouldn't be a problem.

"Cliff..."

But then she murmured that name in her sleep, and I came to my senses.

Turning around, I crawled out of the room on all fours, then fled outside the building entirely.

I'd thought I was still okay for now, but I'd obviously been neglecting my body's needs for way too long. I'd

nearly gotten carried away by a momentary surge of lust. It was past time for me to blow off some steam, if you know what I mean.

Sitting down on top of a nearby sand dune, I started to lower my pants... and then heard a noise. I wasn't alone out here.

"...Hm?"

Had Elinalise followed me outside? Looking around me, I spotted a very sexy woman standing not too far away.

It was freezing cold out here, but she was dressed up like a dancing girl. Her clothes were skimpy enough that they'd probably be transparent in the light of day. She had short curly hair, probably black in color. It was hard to make out her skin tone in the darkness, but her body shone palely against the inky sky.

More importantly, she had a *nice* body. Curves in all the right places, you know? She made Elinalise look like a plank of wood.

The woman put a finger to her mouth and licked it seductively. I found myself staring, transfixed, at her lips.

Slowly, patiently, she walked over to me. And then she crouched down, slowly spreading her legs apart. The sweet smell I'd caught a whiff of earlier flooded into the air, far more powerful than before. It hit me like a tidal wave.

I swallowed loudly. There was something warm running down my chin. When I touched my face, I found I had a nosebleed.

"Heh heh..."

The woman reached out her hand invitingly to me. I accepted it and let her draw me forward onto—

"Rudeus!"

In that instant, there was a shout from inside the ruins.

The woman jumped backward. A split second later, Elinalise slashed her sword through the air where she'd been. Before I could react, Elinalise had positioned herself between me and my seductress.

"Get a hold of yourself, stupid!" she cried.

"Huh?"

I didn't know how to react. But Elinalise was already raising her shield and charging at the woman.

"Keeeaaah!"

The woman let out a high-pitched shriek, and her nails grew to an unnatural length. Her body itself was changing shape. Fully formed wings burst from her back and she beat them fiercely, trying to lift off the ground.

Elinalise was already on her. Swinging her shield sharply into the woman's face, she sent her crashing to the ground. And once she had the thrashing woman pinned in place with her foot, she stabbed her sword down.

"Gyeeaaah..."

The woman let out one final, eerie cry, but Elinalise just pushed the blade deeper.

After a moment, she jumped backward. The woman twitched and spasmed a few times, but soon stopped moving. She was dead.

"Huh...?"

I looked on in a state of shock. My mind didn't want to make sense of these events. And my little guy still hadn't gone back to normal yet.

What the hell? What just happened?

As I sat there stupefied, Elinalise turned around and slapped me in the face.

“Wake up already! That thing was a Succubus!”

“Huh? A Succubus? Wait, really?”

That dead thing lying on the ground had looked like a normal woman to me...albeit one with giant bat wings and weirdly long claws.

Oh. Now that I looked more closely, her skin was actually bright blue. And her face wasn’t quite human either.

She did have a really nice body, though. Before she died, at least. Maybe I could still cop a feel.

“Yes. This is the first one I’ve ever seen, but I’m positive,” Elinalise said. “I guess that foul stench they omit wasn’t just an urban legend.”

“What foul stench?”

It had struck me as a nice fragrance, actually. And kind of arousing. But anyway...

I found myself staring at Elinalise again. She didn’t have much of a chest, but her face was gorgeous, and her legs were shapely. And that butt, my god...

“Hmm. Elinalise, you’ve got a really nice body, you know...”

“What? Uh, Rudeus? Pull yourself together, please.”

It was no big deal, right? The woman loved sleeping around. If I complimented her enough, she’d let me in her pants.

“You know, I’ve always dreamed about making love to a girl like you...”

“I’ll tell Sylphie if you keep this up.”

“Hey, what she doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

Rising to my feet, I started to walk slowly toward Elinalise. She raised her shield and backed away from me.

"Damn, that's right," she muttered. "Succubi can bewitch men, can't they?"

"Come on, babe... Let's have some fun..."

Elinalise frowned, then sighed...

"Hmph!"

And then smacked her shield into my face. I fell back hard onto the sand, bright lights flashing before my eyes.

That didn't matter, though. I had more important things to worry about. Like having sex with Elinalise.

"Haah... haah... Come on, babe. You won't regret it, I promise..."

"Oh, good lord. Rudeus, use Detoxification magic on yourself. And keep using it until you count to ten."

"Detoxification magic? If I do that, will you let me screw you?"

"...We'll figure that out later. Just do it, all right?"

Panting loudly, I started to cast my Detoxification spells —beginning with the most basic and working my way up to the Intermediate incantations. After I'd completed a few of those, though, my body suddenly felt a lot lighter.

"...Huh?"

It was if the fog inside my head had lifted all at once. My lower body was still a little overactive, but my desperate need for sex was already fading away.

I looked over at Elinalise. She was an attractive woman, to be sure. But those were my only thoughts.

"I did hear that the scent of the Succubus has the ability to drive men out of their minds. I see that part was true as well." Elinalise slowly sheathed her sword, then folded her arms with a sigh. "...Good grief."

“...”

What was I even doing up until a moment ago?

I searched my memory for the words I'd spoken over the last few minutes.

...*Shit*.

“Let's go back to sleep, shall we? And do try to be a little more careful next time.” Elinalise was already turning around to return to the ruins.

Fidgeting awkwardly in embarrassment, I called out to her. “Uhm, Miss Elinalise... I'm very sorry about all that.”

Elinalise looked back at me suspiciously, but then grinned in amusement at the look on my face. “What was that line again? *I've always dreamed about making love to a girl like you?*”

I could feel my face heating up. It wasn't my fault! The Succubus made me do it!

“*Come on, babe. You won't regret it!*”

“Ugggh...”

God damn it, this was seriously humiliating.

Smirking, Elinalise walked over to me and thumped me on the head. “It's all right, I understand. The thing has that effect on people, you know? It's hardly your fault. I won't tell Sylphie or Paul about this.”

“You're a saint, Elinalise!”

“Just try not to trust me too blindly, all right? I can control myself for the moment, but my curse will only grow stronger with time. At some point, I won't be able to hold back.”

“Yeah. Okay. If it happens, it happens.”

"No, stupid! You're supposed to stop *me* if it comes to that!"

"Right, right."

Shaking her head, Elinalise smiled gently. "I guess I'll be going to sleep, then. You stay on guard duty for now, please. Oh, and make sure you burn that body."

"Got it."

With that, she walked back inside the ruin. I still couldn't help feeling guilty about the way I'd treated her, but there wasn't much I could do about it now.

I needed to burn the Succubus's body and bury its bones. Up close, it wasn't quite as attractive—its features were kind of bat-like, actually. I guess it looked human enough if you squinted, but I couldn't understand why I'd been so turned on by it before.

I could have sworn it looked like a beautiful girl at first. Maybe it only revealed its real form when its true nature was exposed, like vampires in horror movies.

Still, I hadn't been imagining that figure. The creature's body was voluptuous, all right. Maybe that was the real problem. From the neck down, it was like a much bustier version of Elinalise with wings.

Okay, let's try to get our mind off this subject. This had been a very close call. If Elinalise hadn't come leaping out in the nick of time, what would have become of me? Maybe this thing would have taken me by the hand, lured me out somewhere, and sucked the life right out of me.

Ugh, damn it... I've still got a bad case of the blue balls...

Just another reason to resent this thing. At this rate, I really might throw myself on Elinalise before too long. Maybe I *should* relieve myself before I go back in there.

...keeping an eye out for Succubi, of course.

It was only our first night on the Begaritt Continent, and this journey was already proving to be a real challenge.

Chapter 11: **The Desert Ecosystem**

OUR JOURNEY ACROSS the desert began the next morning.

The attack by that Succubus had at least woken me up to the dangers we were facing here. I'd spent the last few years in a nice, safe university town, and it might have dulled my instincts. They hadn't been that sharp to begin with, but I'd definitely gotten a bit too relaxed about things.

We were on the Begaritt Continent now. This place wasn't nearly as safe as the Central Continent. I needed to get my head in the game, or I was going to get us both killed.

"Let's try to stay covered up for now," I suggested as we got underway. "Make sure you keep yourself hydrated too. Let me know if your canteen runs dry."

"Of course."

The two of us were wearing coats and had hoods over our heads. Exposing any skin could be dangerous out here. If we'd brought Cliff along, I had a feeling he would have been complaining about being so bundled up in this heat.

Although we were in the middle of a desert, I could refill our water supply with magic whenever it was necessary. Still, neither I nor Elinalise had any experience with this kind of terrain, and there was no telling what we'd find on the road ahead of us. There was a risk I'd get heatstroke and find myself unable to use any spells at all, for instance. We had to play this carefully.

"Shall I set our course due north, then?" Elinalise said.

"Yeah, please do."

Nanahoshi's map indicated that the nearest town lay in that direction, although it was rough at best.

Elinalise didn't need a compass to orient us—a relatively well-known elven ability. They never lost their sense of direction, even in forests so thick you couldn't see the sun. With that ability, along with the skills she'd picked up over the years, I was confident she would keep us on track regardless of any obstacles we encountered.

Come to think of it, I'd met quite a few people who could find their way through tricky terrain using nothing but a basic map. I guess it was a skill you developed with enough practice.

"It really is hot out here, though..." she sighed.

"I could try to whip up a rainstorm around us, if you want."

"Let's not, dear. It would probably attract hordes of monsters."

Desert animals were always on the lookout for sources of water. The thought reminded me of the hordes of lizards that had emerged during the rainy season in the Great Forest. Still, I'd heard it said that the monsters on this continent couldn't endure cold. If we ever got swarmed, I could try freezing the air all around us...as long as I could do it without accidentally hurting Elinalise.

For now, though, I just followed along behind her.

This was my first time walking in a desert. It felt like my feet were sinking into the ground with every step. Fortunately, I'd gotten used to moving through the snow up in the Northern Territories. This wasn't exactly the same, but my ability to step lightly still came in handy. I felt like I could keep it up all day without getting too worn out.

This initial optimism proved to be a bit misguided, though. Only a few hours later, I found myself growing increasingly exhausted. The sun beating down on us was the main issue... That and the scorching winds that kept blowing in my face. I could tell my temperature was elevated, and I was starting to feel a little dizzy.

I was rehydrating as often as I could, but that sense of fatigue was still building fast. Maybe I ought to have summoned up a cloud or two above us after all.

In comparison, Elinalise was still in surprisingly good shape. "You don't have as much stamina as I expected, Rudeus."

"The sand isn't that much of a problem, since I'm used to walking through the snow...but this heat is really brutal."

"To be fair, I suppose Cliff or Zanoba would have collapsed by now. It was the right call not to bring them along."

It never ceased to amaze me how monstrously tough the warriors of this world were. Maybe this unnatural stamina had something to do with that battle aura thing too? I was more than a little jealous.

In any case, this heat was bad news. It felt like the sweat was vaporizing before it could even trickle down my face.

Up in the Northern Territories, cold had been the major problem. Back then, I could generate a pocket of heat around me using magic—a practical application of the spell Burn in Place. Maybe there was a variation that would make this place more tolerable.

"Oh, that's nice and cool," Elinalise said. "Did you do something, Rudeus?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to lower the temperature around us just a little."

After a little trial and error, I managed to cool things down by about five degrees Celsius. It was still brutally hot, though. The sun was just too powerful; I had a thick hood on, but it still felt like the top of my head was on fire. Maybe we should have brought parasols or something.

For now, I supplemented my cooling spell by magically freezing the water inside one of my canteens and slipping it inside my clothing. I could just freeze it again when the ice melted.

These adjustments made things a bit more tolerable. I wasn't comfortable, but I could withstand the heat.

We encountered multiple monsters that first day.

The first creature we ran into was a giant scorpion perhaps two meters in length. Its tail was split in two, and it could lash both sides around independently of the other. Elinalise told me afterward that it was called the Twin Death Scorpion. Its sting delivered a very dangerous poison that could only be cured by Intermediate-level Detoxification magic, which made me glad I'd taken the time to learn that tier.

The creature had a relatively tough carapace, but it wasn't too nimble. Elinalise pinned it in place, and I shot it dead with a Stone Cannon in about two seconds. The thing was supposedly a B-rank monster, but it posed no threat at all to us. We worked well together.

If Elinalise had been here on her own, though, she might have had a harder time. I wasn't sure if her attacks could do much damage to a heavily armored enemy.

“Phew. Those things certainly are large, aren’t they?” said Elinalise.

“I don’t know. It seemed normal enough to me.”

“Well, it was about the same size as the monsters on the Demon Continent, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

The monsters of the Begaritt Continent weren’t supposed to be comparable to those of the Demon Continent. It was a bit odd that the first one we encountered was so large. I’d been expecting something maybe half this size.

“Maybe the scorpions are just unusually big?” Elinalise ventured.

“Sure, maybe. Sometimes you just run into the most dangerous monsters right off the bat, don’t you?”

“Not particularly often, I’d say.”

“Hmm. Maybe the monsters in this area are just on the stronger side, then.”

“That seems a bit more likely.”

Still, we kept moving at our usual pace.

The next monster we encountered was a Treant—a common foe this time. This one was a spiky green Cactus Treant, rather than a walking tree. It was a C-rank monster capable of shooting needles at its enemies and using basic earth magic. But once again, it didn’t pose us much of a challenge.

“It’s almost reassuring to run into a Treant, isn’t it?” said Elinalise, wiping off her blade after we were done.

“I guess so. They really are everywhere, aren’t they? Almost like slimes.”

"Hm? Slimes? But those only live deep inside caves."

"Sorry, just ignore me. Anyway, it's too bad the ones out here are cacti, not trees. We can't exactly use their bodies for firewood."

"Yes, they're far too saturated with water, I'd imagine. That might be helpful in its own right, but we already have our magic."

By now, Elinalise could use basic water magic spells herself. I'd assumed she was skipping all her classes, but I guess she managed to learn what she needed to.

The next threat arrived suddenly and without warning.

"We're under attack!" shouted Elinalise, leaping back to my side.

A split second later, something gigantic burst up out of the ground just ahead of where she'd been standing. It was a worm. An extremely large worm—maybe a meter thick and at least five meters long. It let out a strange barking sound in mid-air, then plunged back into the sand and disappeared.

"Good lord, that startled me..." she said.

"What was that thing, Elinalise?"

"A Sandworm, I suppose. A very large one."

Sandworms were monsters that sat waiting patiently under the sand, then burst up to attack when prey happened to pass nearby. I'd never seen one before, but apparently there were similar creatures in the Great Forest. Their sizes differed greatly, though. The forest-dwelling ones were only about twenty to thirty centimeters thick, and they could maybe bite off your leg at worst.

"I hear they have big ones in the Demon Continent as well," Elinalise said. "You've never seen one?"

"Most of the monsters I ran into there were just snakes and wolves. Oh, that and some weird walking armor thing."

"Walking armor? What was this, a Soulbreaker?"

"Nah, they called it an Executioner. It's the one with the big sword."

"Ah, those are a stronger variety. You don't want to run into one of them when you're on your own."

It seemed the Sandworms here were unusually large too. I'd caught a glimpse of five meters of its body, but the rest was still underground; it might be as much as ten meters long in total. That made them large enough to swallow a man whole. If you happened to wander over one without noticing, it was the equivalent of stepping on an instant death trap.

Still, they didn't pose much danger as long as you could avoid their initial attack.

I churned the ground where the Sandworm was rooted, chopping it up with blades of hardened sand. It died without even a shriek. A small puddle of fluid formed around the part of its body that had burst from the surface.

"If they've got caterpillars that big around here, I wonder what the butterflies are like," I mused.

"Maybe that's what they call the Succubi. They're a bit like butterflies of the night, aren't they?"

"Ha ha. Does that mean *you* started off as a bug yourself, Elinalise?"

"Heh, well...we all have our awkward early years, you know."

Hmm. So she wasn't denying that she was a Succubus. Now I was curious about her caterpillar years, though. Was she hanging around the school library with a big pair of dorky glasses? Working the fields in a pair of dirty overalls?

Either way, I had the feeling Cliff would get really excited if he could see a photo. It always tickles a man's heart to see an unexpected side of a girl he loves.

The last monsters we met that day were a group of ants. We spotted them after crossing over a particularly large sand dune. The next instant, Elinalise threw me down to the ground. We ended up sliding halfway back down the hill we'd just climbed.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"That's an army of Phalanx Ants!"

That didn't mean much to me. But I followed Elinalise's lead, slowly crawling back up the dune. This involved staring at her butt for quite a while. Always a sight for sore eyes. Would Sylphie end up rounding out like this in a few years? Her butt was beautiful just the way it was, but I wouldn't mind getting more of it.

"Be quiet, Rudeus. We don't want to provoke them."

Pressing ourselves flat against the slope of the hill, we peered out over the crest at the Phalanx Ants below—bright red creatures, marching along in an orderly formation. Each ant was maybe thirty centimeters to a meter in size. Some were on the larger side of that spectrum, and others were noticeably smaller. They also came in different shapes; I saw a few with wings, and even some who had oddly human-looking lower bodies.

Despite the variations in their ranks, the creatures were marching single-mindedly toward the same

destination. It was basically a river of oversized army ants down there—the line stretched as far as the eye could see on either side. I couldn't even begin to guess how many of them there were.

"Given their size and numbers, that's definitely an S-rank threat," Elinalise said.

"Wow, really? Mind explaining? I'm a little curious."

"Phalanx Ants are one of the most dangerous monsters out there. They're known for their insatiable appetite and their ability to consume anything in their path. Those ones are particularly massive too. They must be a species unique to this continent."

It seemed Phalanx Ants were mutant versions of a more typical species of army ants. Unlike other ants, they didn't establish static colonies but spent their lives in constant motion, eating everything in their path. They did have a number of natural predators, but their sheer numbers made them capable of overwhelming any terrestrial foes—even stray dragons. At certain intervals, they would pause their journey to make a temporary nest, where they bred, replenishing their numbers with the next generation. Similar to the behavior of normal army ants.

However, since these were monsters rather than normal animals, they were smarter and more aggressive than the species they'd developed from. If we started strolling casually along the dune, they would swarm us in the blink of an eye—even if we weren't aggressive toward them.

"None of the individual ants are that powerful. Those ones down there are probably E rank. Maybe D or C for the larger ones."

"Well, C rank's nothing to scoff at..."

And from the looks of things, there were thousands and thousands of them. The danger a monster posed wasn't evaluated in a vacuum, anyway; you had to consider their tendency to move in groups. Even D- or C-rank monsters would be a rank A threat if you got a dozen of them together. In a group of thousands, they'd definitely be a high S.

I'd played a few video games in my old life where you battled ants three times the size of a human being, but there was no real need for them to be *this* big. Especially considering how quick and powerful monsters were for their size.

"Oh! That must be the queen."

Elinalise pointed out a particularly large ant among the crowd. It was at least two meters in length, and had the upper body of a female human. Reminded me a bit of a boss in an old RPG I'd played once.

In my old world, even the queen army ants were maybe fifteen millimeters in size. These things had to be, what, fifty times larger? That was scary, all right. There were lots of monsters that traveled in large groups here, and they tended to be very good at working together in battle. If I threw out an attack spell, they'd probably form up into perfect Roman army formations and charge me from all sides. For all we knew, there might even be some with long-range or magical attacks.

Maybe we'd stand a chance if I used some massive spell to hit all of them at once? No... If I tried to hurl a nuke that big, it would probably end up hitting us as well.

"Uh, Rudeus? Why do you look like you're getting ready to fight?"

"What? I'm not."

"Well, you're clearly *thinking* about how you'd try to kill them."

Was it really written that clearly on my face? What was I, some kind of battle-hungry barbarian? "Sorry. I was just thinking about how to get away if they noticed us."

"All right, then...but we're just going to sit here and wait until the whole army marches past, you understand?"

"Right," I said with a nod. "Got it."

It wasn't like I was going to get any EXP for smashing my way through half a million killer ants. Their body parts might be worth something as a raw material, but I couldn't imagine dragging those heavy carapaces around in this brutal heat. And our objective was to make it to Rapan as soon as possible, not to make a name for ourselves as ant-slayers.

This was basically a scouting mission. I needed to remember that.

It took about an hour of waiting, but eventually the massive army of ants finished marching past our position.

In the desert, the sun turned red as it set. The sand began to glow crimson, and pools of shadow formed underneath the dunes, transforming the scene from a monotonous sandy brown into a striking pattern of vivid red and blacks. It felt like we'd stepped into a different world.

Still, a desert was a desert. The Sahara back in my old world had probably looked like this in the evening as well.

"The temperature's going down fast," I observed. "We might be able to make more progress in the night, honestly."

"I suppose you're right. Let's keep moving for now, then."

“Sure, I’m... Hmm?”

As we were speaking, I heard something flittering through the air nearby. Looking up, I spotted a group of bats about fifty centimeters in length. They were flapping around loudly and circling the area. I hadn’t noticed any of these during the day; they probably came out at night to feed on bugs or lizards.

“Those are Giant Bats, Rudeus.”

“Oh, they’re monsters?”

“A borderline case, but they move in groups. We should be careful.”

As a monster, the Giant Bat was probably an F-rank threat, or maybe E rank if you got a large enough swarm of them. They didn’t have much in the way of offense or magical powers and weren’t aggressive toward humans. The main issue seemed to be that all the flapping could get kind of annoying.

“Huh? W-wait, what’s the matter with these things?!”

For some reason, though, these ones were flocking around Elinalise. They didn’t seem to be attacking her, but they had her all but surrounded. Were those all males, maybe?

“Hey! Rudeus! Don’t just watch. Help me!”

“Yeah, sure.”

Nimble as Elinalise was, she couldn’t very well keep moving with a wall of bats surrounding her. I’d have to knock them all away with a little tornado or something.

“Hm?”

But just as I was preparing to cast my spell, I noticed one particularly large silhouette inside the swarm of bats. It was a humanoid figure with bat wings, and it was skipping

toward us in a weirdly slinky way...and there was a hint of something sweet in the air.

It was a Succubus.

“Oh, crap! Stone Cannon!”

I smacked my big, hard rock right into the little seductress. Grimacing in agony, she clutched at her stomach and hopped backward, then turned to flee. I’d unconsciously dialed back the spell to a non-lethal level. It was hard for me to kill something that looked so human.

It was time to face the facts: I was *not* cut out to be a Succubus exterminator. I couldn’t bring myself to kill the things, and whenever I got a good whiff of their scent...or their pheromones, or whatever...I sort of lost my grip on reality. If I ever found myself in close combat against one, they’d beat me easily.

Of course, as long as I had the benefit of distance, I could take them out with a single Stone Cannon shot. If I could see them coming, they weren’t a threat.

In terms of combat ability, a Succubus was probably the equivalent of an E-rank monster, but it was usually classified as a C rank instead. Its ability to mesmerize made it powerful.

Good thing I wasn’t a virgin anymore. If I didn’t have those sweet memories of my nights with Sylphie to fall back on, I wouldn’t stand a *chance* against those things.

Even in my previous life, I had a soft spot for Succubi. The ones in that world tended to wear a ton of makeup, but that was fine, as long as they never let you see what was really underneath the paint. You just had to let yourself believe the illusion.

Long story short, it wasn’t *my* fault if I got really horny and grabbed Elinalise from behind after we cleared out the

last of the Giant Bats. I was a victim of the circumstances.

“Hey! Rudeus? Get a hold of yourself! Use that Detoxification spell already! Gah, stop rubbing yourself against me!”

“Come on! Please? Just a little? I won’t even put it in all the way! Why don’t I just use the back entrance? That doesn’t count as cheating, right?!”

“Stop being such an idiot!”

“Guhoh!”

My persistent groping was answered with a vicious shield chop. If Elinalise was a character in a visual novel, they’d probably call her a “childishly violent heroine” on the internet. Not that she wasn’t fully justified, of course.

In any case, the pain restored my sanity somewhat, and I used my Detoxification spell.

“Haa... haa... sorry for the hassle, Elinalise...”

“That’s all right. It’s the monster’s fault, not yours.”

Man, it really hurts where she smacked me... she swings that thing like a club...

“Honestly, I hope we’ve seen the last of those awful creatures... Ugh, now you’ve got me all worked up.”

Smacking her flushed cheeks, Elinalise shook her head vigorously. My mating rituals had apparently done some damage this time. It was the Succubus’s fault, at the end of the day, but that didn’t matter. She’d been justified in hitting me.

My jaw was going to be aching for a while, but these things happen.

“Those bats seemed like they were under the Succubus’s control, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

The Central Continent had monsters that commanded weaker monsters as well. The first monster I'd ever seen in this world was one of them, in fact. What was it called, again? I'd only seen it that once, so it had slipped my mind. Some kind of boar-like creature that walked on two legs.

Apparently, the Succubi could control swarms of Giant Bats in the same way. When they saw men and women traveling together, they'd order the bats to attack the women, and take that opportunity to seduce the males. They brought the men back to their lairs, where they'd wring them dry and then literally eat them.

I could take the things down at a distance with a single attack, but a swordsman or warrior used to melee combat would probably be in deep trouble. How could you possibly deal with that scent up close? The longer the fight lasted, the harder it would be to focus. Even the most pure-hearted of knights would eventually fall to their knees.

Gay men were probably the only people who stood a fighting chance.

“...What is it this time?”

Not long after our battle with the Succubus, a two-legged lizard that resembled a velociraptor popped up over a nearby sand dune. More quickly followed, and soon they were moving toward us.

They weren't especially large, but there were more than a dozen of them. A few made an immediate beeline for the fallen Giant Bats and started to feed on them.

“I've never seen these things before,” said Elinalise, raising her shield warily. I also readied my staff and watched the creatures carefully.

“I'm surprised. I thought you knew about every creature out there, Elinalise.”

“I’m not a professional monster researcher, you know...”

For once, Elinalise couldn’t rattle off the name of the enemy we were facing. That probably meant it was a species only found on the Begaritt Continent.

When they spotted us, the raptors hissed loudly, and a few jumped to attack. It looked like they were trying to protect their meal more than anything else. Not that they’d really earned it, considering that we’d killed the bats.

The raptors were quick, and they had sharp claws, but they weren’t particularly dangerous. The two of us took out seven of them in a few seconds, cutting their numbers to about ten. The survivors, realizing the danger they were in, backed away from us warily.

It seemed easiest to mop up the survivors with a single big Earth spell, but—

“Rudeus! Be careful! Something huge is coming!”

A group of larger monsters had been sneaking up on us during the fight. They were *giant* chickens, maybe five meters in height—basically feathered dinosaurs. Their crests were an eye-searingly bright shade of red.

Apparently, these things were natural predators of the “velociraptors.” The pack immediately assaulted the lizards, killing most of them and sending the others fleeing frantically. The chickens consumed their victims violently on the spot.

“That’s got to be a variety of Garuda...”

On its own, a Garuda was considered a C-rank monster, but those that moved in packs were usually classified as B-rank threats. These ones were unusually large to boot. We were probably in A-rank territory here. Since their battle with the raptors was happening some distance from us,

though, the oversized chickens were content to throw a few threatening cries at us rather than attacking.

The few surviving lizards were still desperately trying to escape, but they wouldn't last long at this rate. And once the Garuda finished eating them, they'd probably turn on us next. We might be able to handle them, but...

"Let's get out of here while the getting's good, Rudeus. Something even bigger is coming."

Elinalise's sharp senses had already picked up on a truly massive predator approaching from behind the monstrous chickens.

"Got it."

As we retreated, Elinalise managed to grab one of the smaller raptor corpses to take with us. It would probably make better eating than the bats.

After putting some distance between us and the site of our battle with the raptors, we found a quiet spot to make a temporary shelter. This would be where we spent the rest of our night.

Rather than relying on our provisions, we decided to cook and eat the dead raptor that very night. We still had plenty of food, but any adventurer worth their salt tried to supplement their supplies when they could.

Today had taught us that the desert was a very different place at night. Once the sun went down, the monsters had just kept coming. If we'd stopped to fight the Garuda, we'd probably have found ourselves facing down a new threat only minutes later.

Elinalise speculated that the Succubus' pheromones had attracted the other creatures to that spot. The scent was sweet to males and intolerably foul to females. It was

hard to say if that applied to monsters too, but perhaps they'd learned that there was prey to be found when they followed that odor.

And of course, the Succubi targeted human males... which meant that groups of people would naturally attract swarms of monsters in this desert. The first Succubus we'd encountered hadn't brought any Giant Bats or other creatures with it, but there *had* been a magical barrier protecting that area. Maybe that Succubus had just managed to slip inside alone, somehow.

Oh, crap. What if it was a friend of Orsted's or something?

N-nah, that can't be right... it wouldn't have just attacked me, in that case. It would have asked if I knew him or something, right?

Hold on, though. What if it was all just a big cultural misunderstanding? What if that was just how a Succubus said hello? In Japan, people like to get to know someone by taking a bath with them. Foreigners could never seem to wrap their heads around that one. Maybe this was something similar.

That would be really unfortunate, then. I might have accidentally killed an old friend of Orsted's. Was it too late for us to go back and dig her a grave or something? Maybe he'd be less outraged if he saw we'd shown her some respect...

No, no. If he'd posted a guardian out there, Nanahoshi would have mentioned it. And thanks to his curse, most people instinctively hated Orsted. That probably applied to humanoid monsters too.

It was probably just a coincidence, all things considered.

"Fwaaah... I must say, the Begaritt Continent's not much like what I envisioned." Elinalise's yawn echoed inside our little shelter. I envied her ability to relax. Maybe she'd be a little less carefree if she had any idea what Orsted was like.

Still, I was just overthinking things at this point. We couldn't start worrying about whether every monster we encountered was actually somebody's friend. The thing had tried to eat me. We'd fought back to protect ourselves. It was that simple.

Pushing this unproductive line of thought away, I turned to reply. "Yeah, I guess so. There's a lot more monsters than I expected."

In terms of the encounter rate, this place seemed even worse than the Demon Continent. Hopefully we hadn't screwed up and landed ourselves on the Divine Continent by mistake or anything.

"Well, we're managing all right for now, and that's what matters."

"Sure. Doesn't mean we can get careless, though."

"I don't need *you* to tell me that, dear. Still, if we can keep doing what we did today, we should be able to deal with anything that attacks us."

"Just make sure you're ready to deal with it if a Succubus gets me again, okay?"

"How about you be a little more careful?"

Our first day in the desert was finally over. It had felt more like a week, honestly.

We had a long road ahead of us.

Chapter 12: **Traversing the Sands**

OUR SECOND DAY on the road proved no less eventful. In fact, we ran into even *more* monsters. For how barren this desert looked, it was crawling with critters.

The Sandworms were particularly nasty. They didn't pose a real threat if you stayed alert and spotted them ahead of time, but sometimes you just had other things demanding your attention. Like monsters, for example. At one point, we blundered into a Sandworm in the midst of fending off a Twin Death Scorpion. The thing swallowed me whole instantly and started to drag me underground. Startled as I was, I managed to instantly fire off the intermediate spell Wind Slice to rip it apart from the inside.

After using earth magic to tunnel my way back above ground, I found that Elinalise had taken a hit from the scorpion's poisonous stingers. She was down on her knees and her face was purple. She'd been so alarmed to see the Sandworm swallow me that she'd lost her focus. I quickly killed the scorpion and used my Detoxification magic to save her life.

Neither of us had really screwed up this time, honestly. We'd just gotten unlucky.

"Nice work getting us out of that mess, Rudeus. I can see why you acquired such a reputation as an adventurer."

Elinalise certainly didn't blame me for the situation, even though she'd nearly died, and I was the one who'd been more careless. The woman was definitely mature.

"Don't look so miserable, all right?" she said. "No matter how alert are you, sometimes things just get the

better of you. We managed to pull through, and that's what matters."

The risk of failure was ever-present—as was that of death. Elinalise had been well aware of that from the start.

Fortunately, that was our only brush with real danger on that day. We did catch a glimpse of a colossal monster in the distance at one point. It was trudging along slowly, but every step it took sent up a huge cloud of sand visible even from a great distance. The thing had to be hundreds of meters in size. It was hard to describe. I guess you could say it was like a blue whale with the legs of an elephant.

"That's a Behemoth, Rudeus."

"Huh. You've seen one of those before, Lise?"

"Oh? Somebody's gotten a bit more casual all of a sudden."

"I don't know about that. I just try to be respectful with my elders."

"Zanoba's older than you too, you know?"

"Well, sure, but he's basically just a big kid..."

Apparently, the Behemoth was one of this continent's more famous monsters. They ranged in length from a hundred to a thousand meters.

It wasn't clear what the things ate, but they were only ever sighted in the desert. They had peaceful dispositions, for monsters, and tended to leave people alone unless attacked.

A few adventurers claimed to have slain one and found massive numbers of magic stones inside its belly. Hearing these rumors, some people had tried to hunt them for profit, but bringing down a Behemoth was much easier said than

done. Their outer hide was extremely tough, and given their sheer size, your average adventurer was barely going to scratch them. They had no particular attacks or natural weapons, but simply thrashing their massive bodies around was enough to kill most of their enemies.

What if you attacked them from a distance, then? Well, apparently the creatures were capable of burrowing deep beneath the sand when things started to heat up. Almost no one had *actually* succeeded in killing one. Additionally, despite their massive size, nobody had ever found a Behemoth corpse. This had given rise to rumors that there was a hidden “Behemoth burial ground” somewhere. An exciting concept—it reminded me of similar myths about elephant graveyards back in my old world. But realistically speaking, their corpses were probably just eaten by other monsters.

“You know, *you* might be able to take one down if you tried, Rudeus.”

“I’m not planning to go around assaulting harmless herbivores for no good reason.”

Still, if I ever found myself seriously hard up for money, it might be worth a shot to throw some magic at one from a safe distance.

On our third day in the desert, we encountered our first sandstorm.

Maybe *encountered* isn’t the right word. We were just walking along when we saw something that looked like a wall in the distance—and when we got closer, it turned out to be a wall of *sand*. Elinalise and I considered the possibility of waiting for it to die down, but from the looks of things, this was a static storm that blew constantly in this one

location. It didn't look likely to rush past us or disappear. And we were in a hurry, of course.

I ended up using my magic to clear the storm until we'd pushed through the area. My professors had told me it was best not to meddle with the weather too much, but this felt like a case where I was justified.

When I turned to look back after about an hour of walking, I found that the sandstorm had reappeared exactly where it had been before. It seemed plausible that it was a sort of magic barrier in its own right—a natural-looking defense of the road that led to Orsted's teleporter, maybe. Nanahoshi hadn't mentioned it, but I seemed to remember her saying that she'd been kind of out of it during their trip through the desert.

On our fourth day, the number of monsters we encountered decreased sharply. Maybe that sandstorm kept them sealed off in the area we'd just left.

There were creatures in this part of the desert too, of course, but they were totally different from the region around the ruin. The scorpions only had one tail, and there were no armies of ants. The Sandworms were only about as thick as Elinalise's waist now. Also, there didn't seem to be any Giant Bats flapping around at night. We spotted a few raptors here and there in the twilight hours, but they were smaller, and so were their packs. There was no sign of any Garuda.

Most importantly, there were no more nocturnal ambushes from the Succubi. I guess that was for the best, but maybe a part of me was disappointed?

Nah, let's say not.

Day five was more of the same. We trudged through the same old sand, staring out at the same old featureless landscape.

When you're walking through a place without any visible landmarks, it's supposedly easy to end up going in circles when you think you're moving straight forward. It has something to do with the difference in the length of your stride when you're moving your dominant leg.

I was confident Elinalise was keeping us on track. But I was still starting to feel like I'd seen some of these sand dunes before. Doubt crept into my mind. *Could she actually be lost?*

My growing mistrust wasn't a problem in itself, as long as I kept it to myself. Elinalise would be very annoyed if I voiced any of these thoughts, and if it threw off our teamwork, we might end up dead.

The only thing I could do here was be understanding. If she *did* screw up, I needed to say, "That's okay!" with a big smile. This was a no-negativity zone.

"...Hm. Rudeus, I think I see something in the distance."

In the end, my resolve wasn't actually tested. I could indeed make out a vague blur shimmering on the horizon in the direction Elinalise was pointing,

There was definitely *something* out there. My eyes weren't sharp enough to tell what it was, but its color suggested it wasn't just part of the desert. There was still a possibility it was just a mirage, though.

We made our way toward the blur, staying on high alert.

Come to think of it, we hadn't run into any monsters today at all. Maybe this area just wasn't home to any... Not

that I was going to let my guard down, of course.

As I was thinking this, the shape ahead of us grew larger and clearer. It was a giant rock formation that made me think of Ayers Rock, and it was maybe fifty meters in height.

The wall facing us looked very steep, if not totally vertical. Climbing to the top would probably be challenging. And it stretched from one side of the horizon to the other, with no end in sight.

"Should we try to find a way around it?" Elinalise asked.

"No, let's get up on top of it. I'll use my magic."

With a simple Earth spell, I created a pillar of stone; taking Elinalise into my arms, I rode it upward like a makeshift elevator. There was no telling what might try to ambush us up there, so I took it fairly slowly.

Suddenly, I noticed an odd sensation. Something was... rubbing my butt?

"Uhm, Elinalise?"

"What is it?"

"Is there some reason you're groping me?"

"Oh, just force of habit. Think nothing of it."

For the several minutes it took us to rise to the top of the rock shelf, Elinalise continued feeling me up.

"..."

Maybe her curse was starting to affect her. I was keeping Cliff's invention supplied with mana, but all it did was buy us more time, and it had been about ten days since the last time she'd been with Cliff. She could probably hold out a while longer, but the thing was just a prototype; we

couldn't trust it blindly. The sooner we got to a city, the better.

In the worst-case scenario, I'd have to sleep with her myself. But no matter how I tried to spin it, that would be cheating on my wife. It would still be a betrayal, even if I could blame it on the curse. We'd decided beforehand that I wasn't going to sleep with Elinalise on this trip, and I needed to keep that promise.

If Bazaar had a brothel where she could hire a male prostitute, that would be ideal. That way, it would just be a business transaction. She could see to her needs without either of us feeling too guilty about it.

"Elinalise, we're at the top now."

"Yes, I suppose we are."

Elinalise was still clinging to me, and she seemed to be staring at my shoulders with some passion in her eyes.

"...You can get off now."

"Ah, right. Pardon me."

Elinalise stepped off the pillar and away from me, but her eyes quickly drifted downward to my lower body. I was definitely starting to sense some danger here.

Maybe holding her like that on the way up had been a mistake. If I'd just taken a few minutes to think, I could have figured out another way to get us both up here. In retrospect, I felt like she'd been consciously trying to avoid physical contact with me these last few days. And now I'd gone and thrown a wrench in the works. We needed to get to this Bazaar place fast.

"Let's get going, then," she said after a moment.

"Sure."

Only a few seconds after we began to walk, though, a shadow flitted across the ground toward us.

"Rudeus! Get down!"

As Elinalise shouted out a warning, I threw myself down and forward without even looking upward. An instant later, something zoomed past above me, and a cold tingle ran down my spine.

I quickly jumped back to my feet and looked up. We'd been attacked by a monster with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle. Beating its massive wings loudly, it thumped to the ground some distance away from us.

"That's a Gryphon!" shouted Elinalise, drawing her sword.

I quickly focused my thoughts on the battle at hand. Readyng my staff and turning to face the creature would leave me in an awkwardly exposed position, and Elinalise was currently behind me, a reversal of our usual formation. But even in a situation like this, she could probably maneuver her way to the frontline without getting in my line of fire, and then I could fall back to safety.

Or so I thought at first.

"There's two of them, Rudeus! You deal with that one!"

A loud flapping sound from behind confirmed that we'd been caught in a pincer attack. I'd have to deal with Gryphon A over here by himself. If I dodged out of its path, it would charge right past me and hit Elinalise from behind.

Still, maybe that was the safer route. If she could hold off both of them for a few moments, I'd be able to pick them off one at a time. That would be more like our usual pattern, at least...

But we hadn't worked out any plan to that effect in advance. She'd told me to deal with this one. So if I didn't

kill it, she'd be taken by surprise.

Right then.

The Gryphon was standing with its body bent forward, its beak half-open, glaring fiercely at me. It wasn't far from me, and it looked like an agile creature. It might be able to dodge my Stone Cannon, or even shrug it off. I wanted to be absolutely sure I killed this thing.

It had wings. I wasn't sure how far it could fly on them, but Quagmire probably wouldn't be too effective either. That left my wind magic.

The Gryphon's back legs tensed up suddenly. I was out of time to think. Launching itself forward with a powerful kick, the monster rushed at me with its legs outstretched like a pouncing tiger.

I ducked down and cast the advanced spell Earth Hedgehog at the ground. A circle of three-meter earthen spikes burst up all around me.

“Kyeeaah!”

The Gryphon instantly beat its wings. But my Eye of Foresight was kind enough to show me what it was planning.

It adjusts its course in mid-air, dodges to the side, and tries to take its distance.

Whipping my left hand forward, I fired off a wind spell, creating a shock wave in mid-air that robbed the Gryphon of its mobility. It spun helplessly for an instant; but before I could follow up, it twisted its body around with cat-like agility, trying to brace itself for a smooth landing.

I fired off a Stone Cannon at the spot it was falling toward. The projectile whistled through the air and struck home, passing straight through the creature's body with a

wet crunch. The Gryphon staggered backward a few steps, then collapsed loudly to the ground.



The thing looked dead already, but I finished it off with a fire spell to be absolutely sure, and then spun around to see how Elinalise was faring.

Fortunately, she was okay. I saw her fending off the Gryphon's swipes with her shield while striking at it with her rapier. The Gryphon's front legs were red with blood; she'd obviously been targeting them persistently, trying to reduce its ability to attack.

"Heads up, Elinalise! Stone Cannon!"

"...!"

After a shout of warning, I fired off another deadly projectile. Elinalise sidestepped nimbly out of its path.

The Gryphon didn't follow her. It had noticed me and was trying to dodge into the air. But Elinalise stabbed out with her rapier, striking a shallow blow on its leading leg that dropped it back down.

The sharpened stone hit the Gryphon at the neck and tore through its body, severing its spine on the way out. It crashed to the ground headfirst and began to convulse. Elinalise strode forward and stabbed the creature in the head to put it out of its misery. I proceeded to burn its body with fire magic.

The two of us took a few moments to look around the area for any additional reinforcements before finally letting out a sigh of relief.

"Sorry about that, Rudeus. I got a little careless."

"Nah, I'm the one who wasn't looking above me."

After apologizing to each other for our slip-ups, we turned our attention to the road ahead. The top of the rock shelf had a coating of sand here and there, but for the most part, it was solid stone. At least we wouldn't have to worry about anything lurking under the surface.

"Let's make sure we watch the skies from now on."

"Yes, let's."

With that brief battle analysis complete, we set off once again.

On day six, we figured out that the rock shelf was a Gryphon nesting ground. Multiple creatures seemed to have divided up the area into their own territories, judging by the steady pace of the attacks we faced.

Gryphons were B-rank monsters. They didn't use any magic, but they were physically powerful and had limited flight capabilities. That added mobility made them much more challenging for a magician like me to target. Most of the time, we encountered them alone, but sometimes you'd get small family packs of two to five. The creatures were clever and could organize coordinated attacks and ambushes, so in a group, they were considered an A-rank threat.

They weren't any match for us without the element of surprise, though.

Night fell, but no Succubi appeared to harass us. They presumably avoided Gryphon turf. From the looks of things, the Gryphons were pretty territorial. Once you beat off the locals, there wasn't much risk of another group barging in to attack you that same day.

In other words, we were safe here for the moment. For the first time in a while, we made ourselves a campfire and roasted some Gryphon meat for dinner.

The last group we'd beaten was a male, a female, and their child, so we went with the youngest of the three. Young animals tended to be more tender and tastier. I did feel a

little bit conflicted, as someone who was going to be a father himself before too long, but we do what we have to in order to survive. People are selfish creatures, at the end of the day.

Fortunately, I'd picked up a few tricks when it came to cooking monster meat—like carrying my own spices with me. The raptors hadn't been particularly tasty, but the Gryphon was basically part bird and part mammal, so I had higher hopes this time around.

For the seasoning, I used one part ground Kokuri nuts to two parts Awazu seeds and Abi leaves. After mixing and grinding them together, I tested the blend by licking my finger. Mmmm. Nice and spicy.

I rubbed the seasoning evenly across the surface of the cut we'd butchered out of the beast, taking care to rub it in well. After adding a sprinkle of salt, I moved on the cooking part. Once the surface was done, I moved the meat a little further from the fire to lower the heat and waited a bit longer. Once the fat was visibly sizzling, we were good to go.

Trying not to burn my tongue, I took a cautious experimental bite.

The meat was both tender and juicy. It had a slightly odd flavor to it, but the spices almost completely masked that. Given the way I'd done things, it wasn't cooked completely all the way through. But that wasn't an issue—and once you chewed off the surface, you could just sprinkle a little more seasoning on.

"Ah, this really takes me back," said Elinalise. "Geese always used to carry around little bottles of spice like that too."

"Yeah, that seems pretty common with rogue types, doesn't it?"

After Eris dumped me, I'd spent several years living the adventurer life. Naturally, I'd spent some of that time working in parties. It felt like there was *always* one guy in every group who'd make his own spices and carry them around. For some reason, it was usually the dagger-wielding, lock-picking, trap-disarming sorts. I'd often noticed them squirrelling random nuts and leaves away for later.

Foraged materials weren't just useful for cooking, though. Sometimes you'd run into a monster that recoiled from the strong tastes and smells of certain plants. Some plants also made a decent insect repellent in a pinch. I'd even seen one guy who even tossed some kind of powder in his enemies' eyes to blind them.

"I like the way you seasoned this quite a lot, Rudeus."

"Well, that's good to hear."

Elinalise was openly licking the fat from her fingers. You wouldn't usually catch her doing that when she was eating in a random tavern. Not unless she was trying to seduce someone.

"Your table manners aren't the best today, Elinalise."

"Goodness. Now you sound like Zenith."

"Did Mom used to nag you about that?"

"Oh, yes." She'd flush bright red and hiss, "You're a lady, Elinalise! Try to act like it!"

Elinalise's imitation of Zenith didn't quite line up with the woman I remembered. But I guess they'd known each other well before I was born.

I found myself wondering about where Zenith was now for a moment, but I shook the thought out of my head. There was no point in making myself anxious.

"Were you just as promiscuous back then, too?"

"Promiscuous? That's rather rude. I suppose I was, though. But back in those days, we *all* used to sleep in our underwear, or the nude. Ghislaine didn't even know what a bra was at first! You should have seen the way Paul ogled her..."

It was hard to imagine Ghislaine being quite that shameless...but maybe she was just clueless. That would fit with what I knew of her. As for Paul, well...not to excuse the guy's behavior, but I probably would have done the same thing. Beastfolk women tended to be pretty impressive in the chest department.

"You know, come to think of it... I guess Zenith was about your age now when I first met her," Elinalise said.

"Really? You've known her since she was a teenager?"

"Yes. She was a clueless, innocent little girl. Paul picked her up off the street and dragged her into our party, the scoundrel."

There was a fond, nostalgic look in Elinalise's eyes as she reminisced. Come to think of it, Geese and Ghislaine had seemed just as happy when they talked vaguely about the past. They'd probably had some good times together.

"I got the impression Dad wants to apologize to you about something that happened back then. Is it all right if I ask what it was?"

"...You're better off not knowing, dear," said Elinalise, grimacing now. "I don't think you want to hear *too* much about your father's romantic history, do you?"

"Yeah, you're right." To tell the truth, I kind of *did* want to know, but I didn't want to pressure her. Sometimes a man has to swallow his curiosity.

At least her reply told me it had something to do with his love life now. He'd apparently been in a physical

relationship with Ghislaine at some point, so it wouldn't surprise me if he'd been sleeping with Elinalise too. And then Zenith got pregnant, and the whole party fell apart... I could easily imagine how that could lead to some ugly drama.

"Once we make it to Rapan, I'm sure he'll fall over himself to apologize," I said.

"...I'm not going to forgive him no matter what he says."

Elinalise was scowling again. Whatever happened must have been *seriously* ugly.

Paul really was a good-for-nothing bum. But that exactly was why I had to help him out. Guys like him and me had to look out for each other.

If worse came to worst, I'd just have to beg Elinalise to forgive him myself.

The seventh day started off like the sixth, and we made steady progress north while fighting off Gryphons. This rock shelf went back further than I'd expected—maybe it was more of a mountain. While the top was mostly flat, we couldn't see far in any direction thanks to the giant boulders strewn randomly across its surface.

Every once in a while, though, we'd come across a more open area. This was where the local Gryphons would attack us. We beat them down, then forge ahead. Rinse and repeat.

"Oh."

But then, quite suddenly, the rock shelf came to an end.

"Well, it's about time..."

The ground far below us wasn't barren desert anymore. There was a smattering of trees and plants down there. It looked kind of like a savannah, without much in the way of grass.

In the distance was a large lake—with white roofs clustered all around it.

We'd found the city of Bazaar.

Chapter 13: Bazaar

ON OUR EIGHTH DAY on the Begaritt Continent, we lowered ourselves down off the rock shelf and headed for Bazaar.

From our vantage point, the city looked a bit like a doughnut. The big round lake in the middle was surrounded by a ring of white “frosting”—tents and buildings—with a small green area on the outskirts. Come to think of it, I hadn’t eaten anything sweet in a while now.

“We’re finally here,” sighed Elinalise. “That was quite a hike, I must say.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It feels like we covered a lot of ground in the last week.”

“I suppose the monsters made it feel even longer than it was.”

The ground in this area wasn’t just sand. There was actual soil here, although its reddish-brown color suggested it wasn’t particularly rich, and the plains were dotted with sizable boulders and a few scraggly plants. It reminded me a bit of the Demon Continent, actually. At least it was easier to walk on. And the temperature was much less extreme here. There was a stark difference in climate compared to the desert on the other side of that rock shelf.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Bazaar, it was already evening, and bats were starting to flutter through the sky. They didn’t swoop down to attack us, though, and there weren’t any Succubi accompanying them. They were just ordinary bats. Still, there might be other monsters

lurking around, even if we were close to the city now. We stayed alert as we approached it.

Just as we were getting close, there was a piercing cry from somewhere nearby. Recognizing the call of a Gryphon, the two of us instantly tensed up.

“Is it coming for us?”

“No, I don’t think so. They’re fighting over there, see?”

Elinalise was peering at something up ahead of us, but I couldn’t make out what she was looking at. “Who is it?”

“I couldn’t say.”

We moved forward cautiously in the direction of the city. Soon enough, I spotted a small group of people fighting a pack of Gryphons up ahead. There were four humans and five of the monsters. Well, there *had* been six humans, but two of them were lying motionless on the ground. Of the four survivors, one was crouching down and clutching his head rather than fighting.

In other words, it was three against five. The outnumbered humans were fending off the Gryphons with sizable broadswords. They were a well-coordinated group, but it was obvious that they were starting to get tired.

“Should we help them out, Elinalise?”

She shrugged her shoulders noncommittally. “I’ll leave it up to you.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

Abandoning them would probably leave a bad taste in my mouth. I didn’t see any reason not to ride to the rescue.

“All right. Cover me!”

“Got it!”

Elinalise was already rushing forward. As she approached, I fired off a shock wave blast at a Gryphon that

was currently in the air.

My spell was a direct hit—the monster had been focused on the enemies in front of it. The blast wasn't enough to kill it instantly, but it did send it tumbling to the ground, spraying feathers in all directions. Elinalise leapt on the fallen beast and stabbed it in the neck with her sword.

I fired off more wind spells in quick succession. My second target went down from a single blast, but the third managed to evade my spell. The creatures were aware of my attacks at this point, but they also had armed warriors in front of them, and Elinalise was blocking their path to me. I was free to fire off as many spells as I wanted without fear of retaliation. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Kyeeeaaah!”

Once I'd picked off four of the monsters, the last of them tried to flee. I finished it off with a Stone Cannon to the back. It was never smart to let a wounded, desperate beast go free.

With the battle over, Elinalise and I sheathed our weapons and approached the group of warriors.

“I-is it over?!”

The man who'd been crouching down and quivering finally raised his face. After looking around the area nervously, he smiled in obvious relief. The warriors who'd been fighting the Gryphons turned and approached him.

Rising to his feet, the man immediately began shouting at them. “What are you standing around for? You! Get out there and start looking!”

The warrior he'd addressed nodded and immediately ran off.

“Good grief, what a disaster,” the man muttered. “What on earth was a pack of Gryphons doing all the way

out here, anyway?"

Shaking his head, he turned and approached us with the other two warriors at his side.

"Your assistance was most kind, travelers. Allow me to express my gratitude."

The man wore a turban and a red robe underneath a thin yellow gown of sorts. There was a small red dot in the middle of his forehead. He had a long, skinny mustache, but it didn't make him look especially imposing. He struck me as more of a timid sort—the very picture of a stereotypical desert merchant too. That was fine by me.

"Well, it looked like you were in some trouble," I said.
"We couldn't just abandon you."

"Most people certainly would have."

The man was speaking in the Fighting-God Tongue, so I'd replied in kind. Fortunately, he appeared to understand me just fine. That was a hopeful sign.

"May the blessings of the wind grace you and yours."

With those final words, the man promptly turned and walked back to his fallen companions. Not the most expressive sort, then.

"..."

The two other members of his party were fighters who wore red armor and a thick, skirt-like garment around their waists. They were more heavily equipped than the average Central Continent warrior. The weapons at their hips were large, curved swords with thick blades more than a meter in length. I'd often seen similar scimitars on the Demon Continent, actually. They were probably effective against larger monsters.

Still, such heavy arms and armor wasn't ideal for fighting agile monsters like Gryphons. Maybe that was part

of the reason they'd been struggling.

"Don't see mages too often in these parts."

The one who spoke up first was a huge man with a patch over his left eye and a tattoo covering his face. He was nearly six feet tall and probably around forty years old, obviously a seasoned veteran.

"Hey, Boss. Is that girl a Succubus?" The other warrior was a girl with light brown skin who was staring at Elinalise. I couldn't see much of her underneath the armor, but she looked muscular. I would have guessed she was in her mid-twenties.

"What is she saying, Rudeus?" asked Elinalise in the Human Tongue, looking a bit confused. She didn't speak the local language here.

"She's wondering if you're a Succubus," I told her, also in Human Tongue.

"Well, I suppose I am. In a manner of speaking."

"Wow. She admits it."

"That said, I don't make a habit of spraying foul odors all over the place."

"I keep telling you, they smell really good to me."

The huge man turned to his companion and chopped her on the head. "Don't be an idiot! What kind of Succubus travels with a man? You've got some nerve insulting them after they saved our lives!"

The woman whimpered pitifully in reply. "Oww! But Boss! You said a girl who shows up when there's bats around's gotta be a Succubus!"

It took some effort to understand what she was saying. Maybe her accent was just really strong? I could make out the words, but it wasn't easy.

"This is exactly why they call you Bonehead, kid."

The man, on the other hand, spoke more clearly. I didn't know if he was more fluent in Fighting-God Tongue or what, but I understood him much easier.

Sighing, he turned to Elinalise to apologize. "Sorry, miss. We didn't mean no offense. Carmelita here is kind of a moron, that's all."

Elinalise looked awkwardly in my direction. She had no idea what the man was saying to her.

"What's this now?" she asked me. "Is he trying to make a move on me or something?"

"No. He's apologizing because the woman called you a Succubus."

"Ah, is that all? Well, tell them I wasn't offended at all."

Elinalise turned her most brilliant smile on the big man, prompting him to blush fiercely.

"She says she doesn't mind," I added helpfully.

"N-no kidding? Does she not speak our language or something?"

"Nope. I can interpret for her, though."

The big man was openly staring at Elinalise now. It wasn't hard to guess what he might be thinking—that's a *fine woman there*, or something along those lines. Maybe *too bad she's kinda flat-chested*. Elinalise didn't seem to mind the ogling. If anything, she looked kind of proud to be ogled. I guess she was used to it by now.

Pulling his gaze away from Elinalise, the man looked over at me again. "...My name's Balibadom. Thanks again for your help, stranger."

"I'm Rudeus Greyrat, and this is Elinalise."

"Got it. Well, if you ever need anything—"

"Hey! What's the hold-up, you two?" shouted the mustached man we'd spoken to earlier, interrupting the warrior mid-sentence. "We need to find that cargo *now!*"

"Whoops, sorry. Gotta go. I'm sure our employer will reward you later too."

Balibadom and Carmelita ran over to their boss. The three of them had a brief conference, then split into two groups and ran off in different directions. They were gone in an instant.

"What, they're just leaving? I expected a bit more gratitude," said Elinalise.

I could understand how she felt, but we hadn't gone into this expecting a reward.

"Looks like they left their wounded behind, too..." I looked down at the fallen fighters, ready to cast a healing spell or two. "Oh. They're dead."

Come to think of it, the survivors hadn't even attempted to aid them after the battle. They'd probably been well aware that they were gone.

"This one was still awfully young, the poor thing..."

One of the dead was a teenage girl, maybe eighteen years old. There was a gaping hole in her forehead where a Gryphon's sharp beak had struck her. She must have died instantly.

"I wonder if leaving the dead where they fell is a tradition on this Continent?"

"No decent adventurer would ever do such a thing."

"Well, those people didn't look like adventurers to me..."

Since their party had vanished, I burned the bodies with my magic and buried them myself. It did seem a little

heartless, the way they'd left them here.

That Balibadom guy had promised we'd be rewarded later, but we didn't even know the name of that guy with the mustache. And how were they supposed to come find us if they didn't know who we were? Did they expect us to track them down and demand payment or something?

...Well, whatever. It wasn't like I'd intervened in the hopes of a big payoff or anything. I'd have to satisfy myself with having done my good deed for the day.

"Let's get going, I guess."

"All right then."

The two of us walked off toward Bazaar.

By the time we reached the city proper, the sun had set. The place was surprisingly well-lit, though; there were large bonfires all around, like the kind you'd see at a festival fair. The ground around these bonfires was covered in carpets of some kind. People sat on these in groups, happily eating and carousing with each other. It kind of reminded me of a big cherry blossom-viewing picnic, actually.

Everyone seemed to have turbans on their heads. The colors and patterns of their clothes differed widely, but many of them reminded me of the tribal clothing I'd seen on the Demon Continent. Elinalise and I were going to stick out like sore thumbs. Not that it really mattered.

"I'm getting a bit hungry, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Watching everyone feasting all around us got our stomachs growling quickly enough. Still, we had to find ourselves a place to stay first.

As I was looking around for an inn, though, a man came up and called to us. “Hey, you two! Looking for a meal? I can squeeze you in for just three Cinsha right now!”

From the sound of things, his group was selling off the excess portions of a huge meal they’d made. We decided to take him up on the offer. You couldn’t think on an empty stomach, after all.

Once we’d settled ourselves down on the carpet, the man who’d led us there held out his hand expectantly. “Gonna have to ask you to pay up front, folks. We already cooked the food, see?”

I took out three bronze coins and handed them over.

He examined them suspiciously. “What th’ hell are these things?”

“Bronze coins from the Kingdom of Asura.”

“The kingdom of what now? I can’t use these things, buddy.”

As I’d feared, it looked like money from the Central Continent was no good here. It made sense, really. I’d been planning to exchange my currency somewhere, but we hadn’t had the chance yet.

“How about this, then?”

As I was trying to figure out my next move, Elinalise dropped something else into the man’s palm. It was a small golden ring. He held it up and examined it closely, then nodded happily and went off to find another customer.

“It’s best just to barter in situations like that,” Elinalise explained.

That was those veteran instincts at work again. She’d figured out the right move almost instantly.

"I'm glad I've got you around, Elinalise. You really know your stuff."

"There's no need for flattery, dear."

We settled down on the carpet to wait for our food. This brought back some very old memories from my previous life in Japan. I hadn't been doing much sitting on the ground lately.

"Here y'go, folks!"

We hadn't placed an order or anything, but our food came anyway. The main dish was a thick white bean soup with some mysterious chunks in it, but we had spicy steamed meat on the side. There was also a strange tropical fruit with a slightly sour taste, which they'd covered in a sweet sauce of some kind.

The sweet soup, spicy meat, and sour fruit made for an interesting combination. The meal seemed a little lacking in the carbs department, but once I got started, I found myself enjoying it a lot. The soup was particularly good. The mystery white chunks floating around in it turned out to be rice, rather than meat. So it was a kind of rice gruel?

I hadn't been expecting to find rice here, of all places. There couldn't possibly be any rice paddies in this climate, so they had to be growing it in dry soil. I'd heard that was possible, although more challenging to pull off. It was definitely a pleasant surprise, and I ended up gobbling down the soup in no time at all.

My love for rice had only grown stronger over the years. Just getting a cup of it in my belly made me feel invincible, like I was ready to take on the world. I'd have to see if it was possible to cultivate rice in the Northern Territories somehow. If I taught Aisha the basics of planting crops, maybe she could get a little field going in our yard...

Then again, it *probably* wouldn't be right to turn my little sister into an agricultural worker for my own pleasure.

"Oh? You're not whining about the food for once, Rudeus. That's unusual."

"Well, it was better than I was expecting, honestly."

I even ended up asking for seconds. I never complained about Sylphie's cooking or anything, just to be clear...but rice definitely held a special place in my heart. If I only had some eggs and soy sauce to go with it, everything would be perfect.

I could always raid a Garuda nest for the eggs, right? They were basically just giant chickens, after all. That just left the soy sauce. Maybe this continent would surprise me again, and I'd find some for sale in the market.

"Let's see if we can't find ourselves an inn, then."

But of course, we weren't here on vacation. If we had a little extra time after saving Paul, maybe I could pursue this little side project. Now wasn't the time.

"Right," said Elinalise. "I think it's best we leave finding a guide until tomorrow."

Most of the merchants around us were already closing up shop and heading home. The bonfires were going out one by one, and people seemed to be getting ready for bed. It seemed a little early to me, but we clearly weren't going to be able to hire anyone tonight.

Spotting the man who'd sold us our meal earlier, I called out to him. "Excuse me! Are there any inns around here?"

"Inns? What are you talking about? Just sleep wherever you want."

Interesting. Apparently, visitors to Bazaar who hadn't brought their own tent just slept out under the stars. We

could always make ourselves a shelter with my magic, though.

“Where should we settle down, then?” asked Elinalise.

“It looks like people are clustering closer to the water.”

“Okay, then, let’s set ourselves back a little bit from the crowd.”

The two of us picked our way around for a while, then found a nice open spot midway between two larger tents. There were guards hanging around outside them, so we probably wouldn’t have to worry about any thieves.

I made our shelter on the larger side this time. It took longer to create than usual, but we’d have more space to spend the night in. Once the sun rose, it would probably get brutally hot in here really quick, so we wouldn’t be using it longer than that.

“Phew. Well, at least we made it this far, right?”

“So far, so good.”

Dropping our bags on the ground, we allowed ourselves to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Still, we’re only halfway there. Let’s make sure we stay on our toes.”

“First things first,” agreed Elinalise. “Tomorrow, we’ll buy the provisions we need and find ourselves a guide.”

We spent a few minutes quickly going over our priorities. First and foremost, we needed to exchange our money, buy provisions, confirm the route to Rapan, and hire a guide. We also took a little time to maintain our equipment. Elinalise cleaned her sword and shield, and I looked over our protective gear for any damage. This was just a part of our daily routine by now.

After a few minutes, we finished up and spread out the furs we used for our bedding. But just as I was about to turn in for the night, Elinalise got to her feet. "Okay then, I'll be going out for a little while."

What? Is she running to the convenience store or something? "Uh... to do what?"

Elinalise smiled at the question. "To pick up a man."

In other words, she was going to reset the timer on her curse.

"You've still got a little more time, don't you?"

Elinalise's curse kicked into full gear every two to four weeks. Cliff's magical implement more than doubled that deadline, so she was good for at least a month in between encounters. It had only been two weeks since we left, and it was probably beginning to have some effect on her, but it wasn't urgent yet.

"That's true. But I'm going to hire someone anyway, while we're here."

"Right..."

This trip was going to last three months at the very least. Given how uncertain we were about what lay ahead of us, four months was probably a more likely estimate. Even in the best-case scenario, Elinalise would need to sleep with someone at least once in that time. There was no getting around it.

"Okay, then. I guess I'll see you later."

"Yes, I'll be back eventually. Don't wait up for me, though. Get your sleep in."

"Well, okay...but you don't speak the language here, do you?"

"That won't be an issue. This sort of thing works the same way anywhere you go."

With that, Elinalise left the shelter and walked off into the city.

The next morning, I jerked awake to screams of "Ant attack!" as an army of Phalanx Ants descended on the city.

...And then I woke up for real.

For once, I'd actually gotten a full night's sleep, and my dreams had mostly been pleasant. I remembered one that involved Aisha and Norn demanding that I carry them on my shoulders. When I hefted Norn up there, Aisha would sulk, and when I switched to Aisha, Norn started bawling. But eventually, Sylphie showed up and seized their prize—my shoulders—for herself.

I'd gently chided her, explaining that everyone should take turns, but she replied, "Too bad! This is my seat now! Nobody else gets to use it!" My poor sisters started wailing miserably, of course. Sylphie had been a grown woman when she first showed up in the dream, but she turned into a seven-year-old version of herself once I put her on my shoulders.

It was a nice dream. When I woke up and remembered it, I found myself smirking. Today felt like it was going to be a good day.

Looking over, I saw Elinalise fast asleep, a satisfied expression on her face. It looked like she'd had fun last night. That was good to know, although I felt a little bad for Cliff.

In the morning hours, Bazaar had completely transformed itself. The quiet of the night gave way to a burst of lively commerce. Merchants spread out their goods outside their tents and called out loudly to everyone who passed by.

“I got big, juicy melons here! Last chance, folks! They’re all gone tomorrow!”

“Gryphon claws here! Thirty Cinsha if you buy now!”

“Anyone got Nania cloth? I’ve got Tokotsu fruit to trade!”

The sellers shouted out their prices, while their prospective customers yelled back offers just as loudly. Some were exchanging currency, but many were bartering too. The market crowd seemed to stretch out all around us as far as the eye could see. Here and there, I saw scuffles or fistfights breaking out, but they seemed to be quarrels between merchants, rather than anything really dangerous.

“I’ve got glass bottles from Vega! I won’t be taking these any further east! Anybody need to stock up?!”

Glass products, in particular, seemed to be a focus of trade. I had to assume it was a major industry in this region. One merchant had shelves and shelves full of rectangular containers with intricate symbols carved into their surface; they looked a bit like fancy whisky bottles. Some were brightly colored, but they were all remarkably smooth and clear.

The Central Continent had glass as well, but it tended to be thin and only semitransparent. I’d heard that the richer parts of Asura had artisans who made good glass, but this region probably produced the *real* quality stuff.

Of course, even this glass wasn’t comparable to what I’d gotten used to back in Japan, but some of their pieces

were obviously handcrafted with care. I found myself tempted to buy something as a souvenir.

“Rudeus, we didn’t come here to shop for gifts.”

“Yeah, I know.”

As the market bustled all around us, Elinalise and I got to work on our to-do list from the night before. First of all, we needed money. The currency around here seemed to be the Cinsha—something unfamiliar to me, which was kind of exciting, in a way. In the Central Continent, everyone tended to use simple names like “gold coins.”

The currency itself wasn’t particularly different from any other, though. It was just a small, round piece of gold with a design poorly stamped onto its surface. I’d seen some of these before, actually, when I was passing through East Port with Eris.

We sold off some of the things we’d brought along with us and got our hands on a fair amount of this local currency. It seemed like barter was very common here, but it was always smart to have some cash in your pocket.

The things we’d brought from the Central Continent fetched very good prices. To my surprise, a few cheap cuts of jerky sold for three times what we’d paid for them. We might have been able to negotiate them even higher if we’d tried. I felt like there was an opportunity to rake in some real cash by selling off meat here and buying up glass to sell back in Ranoa...but trying to make money off that teleporter was just asking for trouble.

For now, we secured ourselves about 5000 Cinsha to pay for our short-term needs. I wasn’t sure how much we’d end up needing, but our dinner yesterday had only been 3 Cinsha. We’d probably be fine for some time.

With our money issue sorted, we started gathering information about Rapan. It was apparently a major city, so

this wasn't difficult. As Nanahoshi had assured us, it was apparently about a one-month journey to the north.

I asked about the road there as well, just to get a sense for what we were up against.

"So, the usual route is to head through the Nkots region and take the long way around the desert, but there's been a lotta bandits out that road recently, so it ain't safe. The smarter merchants are cutting right through the Ucho desert these days. You head east till you hit the marker, then go north to the oasis. From there, it's a winding road over to the west fer a while. Once you see the Kara Mountains, you keep them on your left and head north to the next oasis. From there, the desert's a little less brutal off to the east. You push your way through that as fast as you can, then head northwest to rejoin the normal road."

It was nice to get such a detailed reply, but none of this meant anything to me. There were lots of references to specific places I didn't know about, most of which sounded like generic mountains or patches of desert. I got the basic message that there were two routes to choose from, but if we tried to follow either, we'd probably get ourselves lost.

"Are there maps of this area for sale or anything?" I asked.

Maps weren't always reliable, but they helped. You could usually at least get a general sense of where you were. That was always reassuring.

"Maps? Who the hell would bother making something like that?"

It didn't sound like we'd have much luck on this front. This continent hadn't found its Ino Tadataka yet. We clearly needed to find ourselves a trustworthy guide, after all.

"Okay, then. Do you know where we can find someone who'd be able to guide us to Rapan?"

I'd assumed this wouldn't be a problem, but...

"I'm sure there are people who know the way, but you're not gonna find any guides looking for customers here. This city's more of a way station on the road."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah. I mean, usually you want to travel between the bigger trade hubs, right?"

"Ah, I see..."

That did make sense, now that I thought about it. Why hadn't I realized this might be an issue before?

Elinalise had assumed we'd find a guide quite easily, but her experience didn't really apply here. When she visited an unfamiliar land for the first time, she always started off at border cities where travelers were common. But this time, we'd used a teleporter to jump right into the middle of the continent instead. That difference had thrown us off.

Things already weren't going as planned.

Still, there was no point in panicking. Life always throws some curveballs at you. We'd only been out here for two weeks, and the journey would normally have taken an entire year. That was some impressive progress, no matter how you looked at it.

"What would you normally do in a situation like this, Elinalise?"

"Push straight through on the shortest possible route. To be honest, though, I've had enough of walking through the desert for a while."

"Yeah, same here."

"What do you think, then?"

“...Hmm. Maybe we can tag along with a merchant making their way to Rapan?”

“That sounds like a plan. Let’s see if we can find one.”

Aisha had managed to reach Ranoa quickly by hitching rides with merchant caravans. There was no reason we couldn’t use the same trick. We didn’t need to rush, even. The only thing that mattered was getting to our destination safely.

“Sir, would you happen to know of any merchants who’re on their way to Rapan?”

There wouldn’t be any caravans actively looking for guards here, for the same reason that there weren’t any guides to be found. But Elinalise was an S-rank adventurer, and I was a Water Saint-tier magician. If we offered money *and* our services, we might find someone willing to bring us with them.

Unfortunately, the man told us there weren’t many people heading to Rapan in general. Most of the traveling merchants were on their way to a place called Kinkara in the east.

There was *some* traffic to the north, though. Rapan was famous for its labyrinths, which produced a steady stream of valuable magic items; if you stocked up on those, you could sell them at higher prices in other cities. Some merchants made their living that way. Most of them brought magic stones and crystals from the southwest up to Rapan, where they sold their cargo and funneled the profits into buying magic items.

“Dunno if there’s anyone like that around right now, though,” the man concluded. “We’ll definitely get a bunch in a few months, at least.”

This wasn’t too reassuring. I was starting to think we might be better off just hitching a ride to that city out east.

We'd be going out of our way, but at least we'd reach a trading hub where we might find a guide.

Still, I tried asking around the city for a while. Almost everyone was headed to Kinkara, and after an hour or two, I'd very nearly resigned myself to that route.

But then, just as I was getting ready to give up, we stumbled on a lead.

"Oh, Rapan? You'll be wanting Galban, then. I think he pitched his tent over on the west side of the river. Go see if you can find him."

Elinalise and I immediately went looking for this Galban. He'd evidently made his fortune by traveling the route between Rapan and a city called Tenorio, bringing magic stones to Rapan and taking magic items back. People said he traveled in a caravan of six camels, which meant he was earning good money.

It didn't take much asking around before we found the tent that we were looking for. It wasn't that huge, but there were in fact six camels tethered out front.

As we approached, a brown-skinned woman emerged from inside the tent. She wore a breastplate and a skirt-like wrap around her waist. You couldn't see her muscles under the gear, but she looked pretty strong.

It took me a few seconds to realize that this was actually Carmelita, the same warrior we'd met yesterday.

"Hey! You're those people! From yesterday!"

Apparently, she remembered us as well, although she looked surprised to see us. It seemed the mustached little man we'd saved yesterday was Galban himself. Good thing we'd decided to help.

Galban welcomed us with a warm smile as we stepped inside his tent.

"My apologies for yesterday, friends! We were surprised to see you'd already left by the time we got back!"

Apparently, they had run off to track down their camels, which had fled in the chaos—along with the valuable cargo they were carrying. They'd returned to the spot of the battle afterward, only to find that we'd buried their comrades' bodies and disappeared. Galban claimed to have spent a good deal of time trying to find us that evening.

You could have just explained the plan before you disappeared, then...

Still, maybe that was just common sense in a place like this. Your cargo comes first, and everything else can wait.

"It must be fate that you've found us like this. Would you care to join my caravan as bodyguards?"

He'd been looking to hire new sword-arms anyway, from the sound of things. That made sense, since he'd lost a few yesterday.

"How about 500 Cinsha to Rapan? What do you say?"

Judging from the way he rattled off compliments on our elegant defeat of the Gryphons, he'd had this idea in mind from the start. I seemed to remember him being curled up in a ball for the entire battle, but whatever. This was exactly what we needed.

"All right, sure. We'll come with you as far as Rapan, then."

"Ah, splendid! That's truly wonderful. I'd even be willing to sign you both to a long-term exclusive contract, if you're interested. I've never seen a magician of your caliber

before! I'd make it worth your while, I assure you. How about 10,000 Cinsha a year? No, wait, Balibadom would kick up a fuss. Would 8,000 be enough? I could—”

The offers were starting to get a little too ambitious, so I ended up having to interrupt. “I’m sorry, but we’ve got something we need to take care of in Rapan. We’ll keep the offer in mind, though.”

Galban accepted this easily enough. We’d found our ticket to Rapan. Everything was back on track.

Chapter 14: **The Warriors of the Desert**

AND SO, we set out for Rapan as members of Galban's caravan.

The head of his guard team was the warrior Balibadom, also known as Hawkeye. His companions were Carmelita the Bonecrusher and Greatblade Tont. Adding myself and Elinalise, we had five fighters and one merchant in our party.

There were also six camels, if you counted those. I considered making up names for those guys too, but decided against it after learning that we might have to eat them if we ran out of food in the desert. I didn't want my first taste of camel meat to be flavored with guilt.

Before heading out, we'd held a meeting to work out our basic battle formation. As a general rule, we'd be keeping Galban in the middle. Balibadom was in front, accompanied by Carmelita on the left and Tont to the right. Elinalise and I would be positioned in the back.

The five of us would form a protective circle around our employer and his camels. No matter what direction we were attacked from, one of us should be able to intercept the threat before it could harm our client. Your classic Imperial Cross formation, basically.

I felt like Carmelita or Tont might be safer choices for the rearguard, but they wanted to keep me toward the back since I was a magician—and it made sense to keep Elinalise closer to me, since we were used to working together.

"All right, then. Let's get moving."

We were starting off by traveling east from Bazaar until we reached the major regional road. The names of the places meant nothing to me, but this sounded like the route that was frequented by bandits. Just to be on the safe side, I let Balibadom know about what I'd heard.

"We don't know a safer route through the desert," he said. "If the bandits do attack, that's what we're here for. Sometimes they just demand a toll and let us go on our way."

A toll, huh? I hadn't heard about this, but if we could buy our way out of trouble instead of fighting, so much the better. Bandits were just trying to make a living themselves. As long as we handed over what they wanted, they shouldn't ask for more.

To be honest, the idea of handing over cash to a bunch of people who were threatening travelers instead of working honest jobs wasn't too appealing to me. But I wasn't the one who'd have to pay up in this case, so I could live with it.

Still, there was a chance we'd run into some greedier bandits with an interest in more than money and goods. For example, they might demand we hand over Elinalise, given how attractive she was. That could be trouble. It's not like the two of us were old friends with Galban and company. We'd saved their lives, but that didn't mean they'd risk their necks for us if it came to it. There was always a chance they'd hang us out to dry.

"You look nervous, Rudeus, but I wouldn't worry yourself too much," said Elinalise quietly. "With a magician of your skills on our side, a few bandits shouldn't be an issue."

"You think so?"

"I do. And if worse comes to worst, I'll use a little charm on them."

"Uh, what? You *want* to get carried off to their base, chained up, and brutally—"

"Goodness, how extreme. As long as you go along willingly, even bandits will be gentle with you."

"Are you speaking from experience here?"

"We all make mistakes in our youth."

Elinalise didn't seem too concerned at all. Still, those days were long in the past, and she'd probably be less eager to do something like that now that she had Cliff in her life.

Well, whatever. We *could* probably fend off an attack easily enough, as long as we weren't outnumbered too terribly.

Our party trudged through barren fields for a while, heading east.

We had to fight off a lot of monsters on the way. There were Begaritt Buffalos, which charged at you in groups, and Great Tarantulas, huge spiders that scuttled around furtively. We also encountered Windmaster Eagles, flying monsters that would cast wind spells at you from above. Some of our friends from the desert made an appearance as well: mostly Cactus Treants and those killer lizards, which were apparently called Gyroraptors. There were many others, too.

However, Balibadom proved capable at spotting our enemies well ahead of time, so we never found ourselves forced into serious combat. It turned out he had a Demon Eye himself, which was why he'd earned the name Hawkeye.

The man was muscular and tall, and probably in his mid-forties, judging from the wrinkles in the corner of his eyes. You could tell at a glance that he was the wily survivor

type. His hair was cropped short on the sides and in the back; it reminded me a little of the team captain from that old basketball anime. I kept expecting him to shout, “Just tape it!” or something.

His Demon Eye was the same type as Ghislaine’s—it allowed him to see the flow of mana in the world around him. This was most useful as a means of detecting enemies.

“We’ve got monsters ahead. Ready for combat, everyone.”

So far, he’d perfectly predicted every approaching monster and change in the weather. It was almost like traveling with Ruijerd. He wasn’t quite as precise on the details, but he spotted enemies very quickly. His many years of experience was probably a factor there.

“This brings me back a little,” said Elinalise with a smile. “Ghislaine used to spot the monsters just like that, using her eye and her nose.”

When you had someone in your party who could detect enemies in advance, combat tended to be a lot less risky. By the time the monsters came into range, I was ready to hit them with a spell. I’d started off using Stone Cannon, but aiming it precisely started to get tedious, so I was currently blasting them into the air with wind magic and then smashing them down into the ground. That took a bit less effort.

“You’re using those spells awfully freely, boy. Aren’t you going to run out of mana?”

I’d been getting so lazy about it that Balibadom eventually came back to speak with me, looking a bit concerned.

“I should be fine. I can keep this up all day long, I think.”

“I see. You’re a Great Sorcerer, then?”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It’s a title given to magicians who have achieved deep mastery of their craft.”

“Well, uh, I wouldn’t say I’m a master of anything yet.”

“In any case, it’s rare to find a magician willing to use their powers so freely.”

Many magicians made a point of not spending more than half of their mana supply in any given day. That was standard in the Northern Territories too. Since most mages weren’t too physically strong, their mana supply was all they had to rely on to defend themselves. But I’d never even emptied half of my tank, as far as I knew.

Keeping some mana available for emergencies was basically just common sense. To desert warriors who didn’t know much about magic, though, it probably looked like most mages were just slackers. Balibadom seemed to have enough experience fighting in a party to understand the real reason why magicians held back. Still, he didn’t seem that knowledgeable about magic in general, given that he didn’t comment on my silent spellcasting.

“I’m glad to have your firepower on our side,” he said, “but try to save some mana for unexpected situations. There’s five of us in this group, you know? Hold back on the long-range attacks until I call for them.”

“Got it.”

I wasn’t exactly trying to hide the fact that my mana supply was massive, but I didn’t see a reason to come out and tell him that either. I wasn’t too sure where my limits actually were, for one thing. I didn’t want to get too cocky and end up causing a disaster.

At night, the five of us took turns standing watch while Galban rested inside his tent alone. We were all expected to sleep outside. Not that I'd been expecting equal treatment or anything.

I created a shelter and encouraged everyone to sleep inside it, but Balibadom and the others declined, saying they'd have a harder time noticing any monsters that might approach. That seemed like a legitimate reason to sleep outside, actually.

It made me feel a little awkward to use the shelter myself, but Elinalise intervened. "There's no need to feel bad, Rudeus. We've got our own way of doing things, and we'll be more useful if we're well rested tomorrow."

That made sense to me, so we ended up sleeping in our little hut after all. It was definitely more restful than the alternative.

Two of us would be standing guard at a time throughout the night. I'd assumed one would be enough, but apparently it was safer this way when you had a group of this size. We'd be changing up the shifts every night.

On our first night, I was paired with Carmelita.

"Hey, there. Guess we're working together tonight, huh?"

"Yes. Don't fall asleep."

"Well, I wasn't planning on it."

While we did technically have a job to do out here, staring silently at nothing in particular can get pretty boring. The two of us eventually started to make a little conversation.

"Thanks for the help. The other day."

"Oh, you're welcome. It was no big deal."

"You're strong. So's the other one. The woman."

Carmelita the "Bonecrusher" was a warrior by profession and would be turning twenty-one this year. Her weapon of choice was a sword with a wide, thick blade more than one meter in length, which she swung around ferociously in combat.

It seemed like many of the warriors in this region favored huge weapons of that sort. Balibadom also carried a massive blade. There seemed to be many large monsters with thick, tough shells around here; it made sense to use weapons that wouldn't break easily. No matter how skilled a swordsman you might be, you wouldn't want to try punching a hole through an iron plate with a skinny little rapier.

Their combat style seemed to be somewhat unique as well, from what I'd seen of it.

"Your woman's sword is too thin, though. You can't kill anything with that."

"You might be surprised, actually. It's a magic item, and she knows how to use it. I've seen her cut up Gryphons. Oh, and just so you know, she's not actually my woman. We're just friends heading to Rapan together."

"But you sleep with her, yes? When a Succubus comes?"

"Uh, no. I know some Detoxification magic, so I just use that..."

"When a Succubus comes, the men are aroused. The women sleep with them. It's the way of things, in the desert."

"Oh?"

Carmelita went on to explain the connection between the Succubi and the way warrior bands worked in the

desert, sounding rather proud of herself.

These days, Succubi could be found all across this continent. The species was originally native to the southwest region, and their numbers were relatively low, but in the war four hundred years ago, Laplace had deliberately encouraged them to reproduce. It had been part of his plan to break the stubborn resistance of the Begaritt warriors.

Succubi were deadly against men. Their pheromones could incapacitate even strong-willed veteran fighters. I could attest to that part personally. If two of them were to come at me at once, or if one popped up right in front of me, I wasn't at all confident that I'd survive.

Once hit by a Succubus' pheromones, men were reduced to thoughtless slaves. But a single Succubus can only bring so many victims back to her lair at once. They tend to pick out a few choice morsels, leaving any others behind. The men left behind in this manner then fight each other to the death. Once your mind is poisoned by the pheromones, every other man you see automatically becomes your enemy. It sounded a lot like the Charm status effect, honestly.

To cure someone of this condition, you had to either dispel it with an Intermediate-tier Detoxification spell or let them sleep with a woman. And four hundred years ago, basically no one on this continent could use Detoxification magic.

As a result, many young men who were virgins ended up losing their lives. There wasn't much to be done—they didn't have anyone to sleep with. They probably died wishing they'd had sex with *someone*, even the Succubus that doomed them. I could empathize...

To jump forward a little... Over time, the warriors of the Begaritt Continent had adapted to their circumstances. Every band began to travel with a number of women. At first, these were often slaves or demon prisoners, but the warriors quickly realized that the noncombatants were slowing them down. The women had little stamina and constantly needed to be protected in battle.

The warriors thought the matter over. They racked their brains for years and finally landed on a solution: they could train women to be fighters, too. Exactly the sort of solution you'd expect from a bunch of Conan the Barbarian types.

And that was how the women warriors of the Begaritt Continent first came into being.

At present, every group of fighters or guards on this continent contained at least a few women. When the party encountered a Succubus, they were responsible for slaying it and then sleeping with the men to break the spell. Some groups even had more women than men, since facing Succubi was safer that way. All in all, the women of this continent did *more* than their fair share of the fighting.

Carmelita had no objections to her role. Whenever her band encountered a Succubus, she killed it and slept with the men to break its enchantment. Of course, this sometimes resulted in pregnancies, but the women warriors accepted this and would return home proudly when it happened. The baby was eventually entrusted to the people of their village, and the warrior returned to her duties. Carmelita had already given birth to one such child herself.

These babies were raised by their entire village, rather than their parents. All were cared for and treated equally regardless of their heritage or race. They were taught to fight as children, and once they reached physical adolescence, they underwent a coming-of-age ceremony

and left their village behind. When a warrior grew too old to fight, they earned the right to return home and devote themselves to raising future generations.

However, there were some who chose never to go back, preferring to spend their entire lives fighting. Balibadom was one of these.

Naturally, there was no real concept of marriage in these villages. It was hard to imagine anyone in that society getting romantically attached to any one specific person.

Honestly, the culture shock was real. I'd read about tribes with similar arrangements back in my old world, but... it was definitely hard to get my head around. I couldn't even manage to convince myself it was sexy.

I looked over at Carmelita for a long moment, trying to understand things from her point of view.

"I'm grateful to you," she said in her halting way, "But I hate mages. If a Succubus shows up, go to the other woman."

For some reason, it stung a little bit to get shot down in advance like that. Although I could deal with the Succubus thing myself anyway.

Greatblade Tont was a quiet man in his thirties with a thick mustache, light brown skin, and rippling muscles. He wasn't quite as tall as Balibadom, but their faces looked very similar. Without the facial hair, I could easily have mistaken them for each other. We spoke a little on our first night watch together, but he wasn't a chatty sort. It was a real contrast with Carmelita, who seemed to enjoy talking.

I didn't have anything in particular I wanted to discuss, but time seemed to pass slower when we were just staring

out into the darkness silently. After a while, I tried to draw him out.

"I like your name, by the way," I said. "Greatblade Tont. That's got a nice ring to it."

"Yes. The matriarch chose it for me."

"Oh, really? You didn't just pick up the nickname at some point?"

"The matriarch chooses our second names. It is so for all the warriors of the desert."

Apparently, their titles weren't just nicknames, but rather ceremonial names given to them by the village elder on the day they left it for good.

For those with great strength, like Carmelita, this was often something like Bonecrusher or Mighty-Arm. Those with sharp eyes, like Balibadom, were usually Hawkeye or Eagle-Eye. You could usually tell from a person's name what their greatest talent was, in other words. But since there are only so many ways to call somebody "strong," you'd sometimes run into another warrior who shared your name.

Tont was known as Greatblade, but his sword wasn't unusually massive by his people's standards. It was just a way of saying he had physical power. Maybe there was a "One-Cut Killer" out there too.

"Well, people just started calling me Quagmire Rudeus, I guess," I said. "I used that spell every single battle for a while."

"I haven't seen you create a quagmire even once."

"Yeah, it wouldn't be too effective against the monsters around here."

The spell was very useful against crawling, creeping, or walking monsters, but way less so against anything that could get itself up off the ground—like a Succubus or

Gryphon. And stopping a slow, heavily armored bug in its tracks didn't make that much of a difference.

I wasn't bothering to stop monsters before I targeted them these days anyway.

"Your magic is always flashy. If it's your specialty, I'd like to see it at least once."

"Well, Quagmire's kind of a boring spell, honestly...but I'll try to use it sometime, if I get the chance."

With a small nod, Tont fell silent. Apparently, he'd used up his supply of words for now.

As our party moved further east, the land around us grew steadily greener

That Kinkara place lay in this direction, and a large jungle just beyond it. It struck me as a little strange that a jungle could exist so close to a barren desert, but we weren't going to get the chance to see it this time. When we reached a large vertical rock someone had left behind as a landmark, Galban changed our course, and we started heading north.

After three days of traveling in that direction, we ran into the main regional road. It wasn't paved, much less actively maintained; it looked more like the natural product of countless travelers moving in the same direction. Compared to the sandy terrain we'd been traveling on, though, it felt firm and reliable underneath my feet. That suited me fine.

"Sir, we might run into bandits now that we're on the road. I think we'll manage just fine, but if things turn ugly—"

"I'm paying you good money, aren't I? Just worry about keeping the goods safe!"

"...Yeah. All right."

Balibadom clearly wanted Galban to consider abandoning the cargo in an emergency, but the man was having none of it. Maybe his merchandise was more important to him than his life. Didn't make much sense to me, but who was I to judge?

"We gonna be okay, Boss?"

"Don't waste your time worrying about it, Bonehead."

For some reason, Balibadom and Tont often referred to Carmelita in this way. I guess it was a friendly spin on the Bonecrusher thing...or maybe an insulting one. Either way, I had the feeling that she'd punch me in the face if I tried to use it.

"Quagmire, Dragonroad, I want you two to stick to Galban like glue from now on. Tont, you're on the camels. Don't let a single one slip away. Bonehead, you take the rear. I'll scout ahead of us and give the signal if something's up. You better not miss it."

"You got it, Boss."

"Gotcha."

"Roger."

Assuming our new positions, we set off cautiously. The bandits around here mostly set ambushes and waited for people to blunder into them, from the sound of things; if you spotted them in advance and took a detour, it was possible to avoid trouble completely.

Thanks to Balibadom's expert scouting, we were able to detect the first ambush in our path well ahead of time. Groups of people weren't as easy to detect with his Demon Eye, but he'd managed to spot them the old-fashioned way. We took a long, looping detour off the road and around the danger. You won't find many people who willingly walk

through a dog turd they've noticed up ahead, right? It's only natural to go around it.

As it turned out, this was a mistake.

Maybe Balibadom was spotted by the enemy during his scouting expedition, and they tailed him back to us. Maybe he'd only seen a small part of the bandits' forces, and our detour just happened to lead us into their main army.

Either way, we came under attack.

It happened right after we'd put a safe distance between ourselves and the ambush. Everyone was just starting to breathe a little more easily.

And then something came whistling through the air.

All of a sudden, Tont had an arrow in his chest. He fell to the ground.

Failing to understand what was happening, I started to rush over, intending to cast a Healing spell. But Elinalise grabbed me by the collar and pulled me back.

As she did so, another arrow struck the camel that Tont had been standing next to.

"Run!" screamed Balibadom. "We're under attack! They're coming from the west!"

It finally hit me that we were in serious danger, and that we needed to flee for our lives. Elinalise released me. Galban and the camels were already sprinting desperately forward; I followed after them, running as fast as I could.

There was a group of men on horseback on a hill to our left, and they were charging at us. They were mounted, and

we were on foot. All of them wore an identical sandy yellow turban.

“Sir, we’ve got to leave the camels! They might let us go if we hand over everything!”

“Not a chance!”

“Are you suicidal, or just an idiot?!”

“Protect my cargo, damn it! That’s what I hired you people to do!”

“It’s not possible! There’s just too many of them!”

As Balibadom and Galban screamed at each other, our wounded camel stumbled clumsily. Just as I realized it was foaming at the mouth, it staggered off to one side and collapsed.

A cold shiver of dread ran down my spine. These arrows were poisoned.

“Tch! They’re coming from the rear, too!”

Another group of horsemen was bearing down on us from behind, and the archers on the hill were readying their next volley. Most of their shots were falling short, but a few could really make their arrows fly; every now and then, one would come dangerously close to hitting us.

There had to be fifty of them. No, a hundred. And that was just the ones that we could see.

The word *bandits* had misled me pretty badly. This was an army we were up against.

“...”

My heart hammering in my chest, I tried to analyze the situation. We were under attack from the flank and the rear; at the very least, there weren’t any foes directly in front of us. That was where we had to flee.

“Rudeus!” shouted Elinalise.

“Right. I’m going to use Quagmire and Deep Mist.”

The spells popped into my mind immediately. Nothing else was going to work here.

“All right, fine! Do it already!”

Turning around, I summoned up the largest quagmire I could manage. I didn’t bother making it too deep. It just needed to trip up the horses.

“Balibadom! I’m going to blanket us in fog! Keep running straight ahead!”

“What?! Uh... All right!”

“Deep Mist!”

By summoning up an enormous amount of moisture in a wide range all around us, I effectively covered the area in a thick white shroud of mist. It almost felt like we were inside a cloud or something. No matter how talented their archers were, they wouldn’t be landing any shots on us now.

But a split second after that thought ran through my head, an arrow thumped into the ground a few feet in front of me.

“Gah!”

Startled, I nearly fell backward, but Elinalise caught me before I hit the ground.

“It’s all right, Rudeus! They’ve got one brilliant archer, but he won’t be hitting us again!”

What? Was she saying that the same person had killed both Tont and the camel? How did she know?

It didn’t matter, though. We had the mist on our side now.

“Come on, run!”

Nodding shakily, I got moving. He wouldn't be able to target us again. He wasn't going to hit me. It just wasn't possible. I was invincible!

Damn it! I should have asked Sylphie for some lucky charm or something! Maybe I could have taken my souvenir of our first night together from the shrine...

"Shit, they're catching up! Draw your sword, Carmelita!"

Balibadom's shout brought me back to reality. When I listened closely, I could hear the sound of hoofbeats approaching us from behind. Some of the riders must have swerved around my quagmire. And despite the fog I'd thrown up, all they had to do was charge straight in the direction they'd been moving.

We were up against mounted fighters here. Cavalry did have some weaknesses, but their speed was a deadly weapon in itself.

I'd seen at least fifty riders rushing toward us; how many had made it past my spell? Twenty? Thirty? I didn't want to try fighting a group that large at close range.

"I'll slow them down! Keep running, everyone! *Earth Wall!*"

I summoned up a thick, two-meter wall behind us without slowing my pace. A galloping horse couldn't be brought to a sudden halt. In this fog, many of them would probably smash right into it. Even if they realized it was there, they'd have to slow down and go around.

"Haah...haah..."

There weren't arrows falling all around us anymore, but I still ran like my life depended on it. Every few seconds, I paused to summon up a new wall behind us.

As I fled, I thought of Tont, who'd taken an arrow to the chest at the very beginning of the ambush. Were we leaving him to die?

No. He was a goner either way. That arrow had hit him in the heart, and it was poisoned. Even with Advanced Healing magic, it was probably a fatal wound. And more to the point, there was no chance we could have stopped to help him.

Gritting my teeth, I focused on running as fast as I could.

I'm not sure how long we kept running, but it felt like at least two hours. Probably more. Eventually, Balibadom looked behind us and called out, "I think we've lost them," and everyone staggered to a halt.

"Haah...haah..."

I was exhausted, of course, and soaked in sweat. But all my morning runs hadn't been in vain. I could have kept going if I had to.

The three warriors in the party barely even had to catch their breath, though. That battle aura stuff was really just unfair.

"Gaaah...haaah... Gweeeh..."

Galban collapsed to the ground, his face pale as a sheet. Even for a seasoned traveler who'd spent years on the road, running for two hours straight was a lot to ask. At least I wasn't the only one.

We'd lost only one camel in the raid. And one bodyguard, of course.

Poor Tont. If I'd been able to yank that arrow out right away and take some time to cast Healing and Detoxification spells, there was a chance he might have lived. Maybe the

arrow hadn't struck him right in the heart. I probably would have *tried* to save him, if Elinalise hadn't grabbed me by the collar. But if I'd stopped to focus on him, I wouldn't have gotten away in time. The next arrow probably would have gotten me.

Elinalise was right to pull me away. Her experience in battle had probably saved my life. Even if I'd only hesitated for a few seconds, it might have proven fatal.

"..."

Looking around the group, I noticed that Carmelita was glaring at me. Had I done something to upset her back there? Nothing came to mind.

During the ambush, she'd been positioned behind me in the rear of the party. Maybe she'd been injured at some point and needed healing. It didn't look like any arrows had hit her, though.

All of a sudden, she stomped up to me and grabbed me by the front of my robe. "Why?! Why didn't you kill them?! You could have! I saw your magic!"

"Wha—"

What was she saying? Had she expected me to kill that entire group of bandits?

It sounded crazy. But after a moment, I realized that I'd never even *thought* about trying that approach.

"Stop it, Bonehead!"

"You saw it too, didn't you? He made the horses sink into the ground! He made them run into walls! He made everything foggy!"

"You're not thinking this through, damn it! Use your brain for once!"

“Shut up! If he’d used his magic, we could have avenged Tont!”

“There were too many of them, kid! That was Harimaf’s band out there, I’m sure of it. There were more of them behind those hills!”

“But—ah!”

Elinalise had pushed herself in between me and Carmelita. She pressed her buckler against the woman warrior and put a hand on the rapier at her waist.

“Do you object to the way we handled that?” she said.

“What...?”

“Rudeus acted appropriately, given the situation. We were hugely outnumbered and facing a force of unknown strength. Worse, they were shooting poisoned arrows at us. He stopped their cavalry with his quagmire, blinded their archers with the mist, and bought us time to escape with his walls. He’s the only reason we’re alive. We lost one man and a single camel, but we got away. Would you have preferred to stand and fight? We would have died like fools, and they would have taken everything.”

The actual words meant nothing to Carmelita, since Elinalise was speaking in the Human Tongue. Still, her frosty tone of voice made her meaning clear enough. It was rare for Elinalise to speak so aggressively to anyone, especially an ally.

She did have a point about their raw numbers. I saw fifty bandits at the very least, but there must have been a hundred of them or more. And as Balibadom pointed out, they might have had more waiting in reserve.

Could I have killed a force of that size single-handedly? It was hard to say. But I could use Saint-tier magic and probably enough mana to use it repeatedly for some time.

After stopping the cavalry with a quagmire, I could have quickly cast a wide-range spell and decimated the archers. I could have knocked the riders off their horses with a blast of wind, then roasted them with fire magic. It was all theoretically possible.

I wasn't confident I would have pulled it off, though. For all I knew, those bandits had experience fighting mages. If a single archer survived, a poison arrow might have come my way. Some of the riders could have slipped past my quagmire and cut us down. And if it ever turned into a melee, I couldn't have thrown around my spells without killing my allies.

Elinalise was aware of all this. That was why she was taking my side so firmly.

"And just to remind you," she continued, "we're bodyguards, not mercenary soldiers. We didn't sign up to fight an entire army on our own."

"..."

"Is there a reason you're still glaring at me? Do you want to fight—is that it? What a willful child. I'll indulge you, if you insist."

Finally losing her patience, Elinalise drew her rapier. Carmelita hurriedly reached for her own broadsword. But before things could go any further, Balibadom stepped in between them.

"Cut it out, both of you. Look, it's a damn shame about Tont, but Quagmire made the right call. The only one who wanted to fight was you, Bonehead. You really are a moron sometimes, you know that?"

"...Shut up."

With a loud snort, Carmelita backed down. She proceeded to stalk over to where the camels were resting,

crouch down next to them, and bury her face in her knees.

Balibadom watched her for a moment, then sighed.
“Sorry about that, you two.”

“Uhm, that’s all right...”

“It’s just...Carmelita had a kid with Tont, you know?”

“Huh?!”

“So, well...I think you can understand how she feels.
She’s just lashing out.”

Those two had a *child*?

I’d assumed that the female warriors of this continent didn’t get emotionally attached to any one specific man, but clearly that wasn’t always the case. Maybe it was different when they had a baby with someone.

As I stood there at a loss for words, Elinalise sheathed her rapier and turned around to face me. “There’s no reason for you to feel down about this, Rudeus.”

“...There isn’t?”

“There are some adventurers out there who make a point of never killing another human being. Not many of them, granted, but they do exist. And you’re going to become a father soon. I can understand why you’d hesitate to take so many lives.”

Her attempts to comfort me were a little off the mark. But of course, she didn’t know what Balibadom had just said to me.

To be honest, I hadn’t *hesitated* at all. The thought of killing those men just hadn’t even entered my mind, despite the mortal danger we were facing.

Of course, a few riders had probably lost their lives riding headfirst into those walls I threw up in the mist. I

didn't feel any guilt about that either. But the idea of using magic to murder someone directly just made me queasy.

...It was kind of pathetic, honestly.

"Thanks, Elinalise."

Still, I thanked her for trying to cheer me up. Thinking back on it, she'd been running right at my side for the entire retreat; when I lost my balance, she'd been there to brace me. It felt like she'd positioned herself to shield me from any stray arrows too.

I had a feeling she considered herself *my* bodyguard, more than anything else.

"No need to thank me, dear," she said, patting me on the shoulder. "I'll always look out for my grandson."

Your grandson, huh? Hmm.

By the time we got back home, Sylphie's belly would be very big. That baby was going to be Elinalise's great-grandchild. I'm sure she wanted its arrival to be a happy occasion. Or maybe she just didn't want to have Sylphie tearfully asking her why she'd failed to keep me safe.

Either way, the solution was simple enough. We'd just have to make it back together.

"Uhm, Elinalise..."

"What now?"

"Thank you. Really."

This time, I put more feeling into the words.

In reply, Elinalise just patted me on the shoulders.



Despite the awkward atmosphere, our party moved steadily onward.

Balibadom was surprisingly calm and collected, considering we'd just lost another of his men. His first focus was on reworking our formation. Far from pausing to mourn his comrade, he didn't even speak Tont's name again. He was the same professional, focused bodyguard he always was. It seemed a little cold, but this was probably just how things went in his line of work.

His people were used to this. Death was a constant companion for them; a single mistake or a little bad luck was all it took to end their lives. This was a common attitude on the Demon Continent as well, in retrospect. It was a way of thinking I couldn't quite understand.

A few uneventful days later, we reached the oasis that marked the midway point of our journey. Much like Bazaar, it was mostly a marketplace surrounding a small central lake. I hadn't noticed before, but every other armed group we saw did have at least one woman among them. They were all warriors of the desert as well, presumably.

Galban and the others pitched our tents in an open corner of the little town. While we were in the oasis, at least, the bodyguards apparently got to sleep inside too.

"Balibadom, do you think we need to hire someone to replace the man you lost?" Galban asked.

"Shouldn't be necessary, Galban. These two are more useful than your average warrior. I think it's smarter to head to Rapan with our current group, then hire some new folks

there. We shouldn't be running into any more bandits, anyway."

"I see. All right then, let's do that. Still, it's a pity we lost that camel..."

"These things happen. We were lucky to get away that lightly, considering their numbers."

Balibadom and Galban seemed to be on casual terms. It almost sounded like they were business partners, to be honest.

"What is it, Rudeus? Is there something on my face?" Sensing my gaze, Galban turned to look at me.

"It's nothing, really. I was just thinking that you and Balibadom seem to get along."

"Ah, yes. We've worked together since the days when I was just a fledgling merchant, you see. I trust him more than anyone."

Interesting. If they'd spent that much time together, maybe Balibadom had always been closer to Galban than Tont, his fellow warrior. After years and years serving as a head bodyguard, it was possible he'd started to see his men and women as disposable. Or at least interchangeable, given how regularly they came and went.

We stopped in the oasis long enough to rest up and replenish our supplies of perishable goods, then headed on to the north.

Carmelita didn't pick any more fights with me, but she wasn't any friendlier than necessary either. We didn't talk during our night watch shifts anymore.

I tried not to let it get to me. We'd be going our separate ways once we reached Rapan anyway. Still, I had to empathize with what she was going through. I couldn't

imagine what it felt like to lose the father of your child so suddenly.

I knew how much it would hurt if Sylphie up and died on me, at least. I'd been overwhelmed with joy when I learned she was pregnant. If I lost her suddenly, the despair would be even more intense.

"...And I guess I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

Assuming the Man-God was being straight with me, this voyage to the Begaritt Continent was going to cost me one way or another.

He'd first told me that when I met Elinalise at the age of fifteen. I'd spent some time in Ranoa, but Nanahoshi's shortcut meant I wasn't getting to Rapan *that* much later than I would have if I'd left when I met Elinalise. I had to assume the danger that awaited me in Rapan hadn't changed in that time.

If that was true, though, it probably meant no harm would come to the people I'd left behind in Ranoa. After all, if I'd left for Begaritt right away, I wouldn't have met Sylphie or gotten to know my other friends. I'd have no reason to "regret" some disaster taking place there.

But now that I thought about it, maybe the regrets that lay ahead were different now. Things might go smoothly on my end but poorly back home. Something might happen to Sylphie, or the baby.

"Did you say something, Rudeus?"

"Nah, it's nothing..."

I had to stop speculating about this. You could drive yourself insane thinking about all the ways things might go wrong. And a guy like me was always going to make mistakes, no matter how hard he tried.

There was no telling what the future held.

This was the first time I'd ever directly gone against the Man-God's advice. Up until now, I'd done well for myself by following his lead. Did that mean this choice was going to end in disaster, no matter what I tried?

Nah. I wasn't buying that. I knew there was danger ahead, so it should be possible for me to avoid it. Still, there was a real risk someone I cared about might end up like Tont. If I wanted to prevent that, I needed to stay sharp. And if there *was* someone out there who wanted to harm my family, this time—

Stop it. This is pointless.

I could tell myself anything I wanted, but I had no reason to believe I was even capable of murder. I'd just have to do everything I could to keep my family safe.

That, at least, I could promise myself.

Two weeks later, we finally reached the Labyrinth City of Rapan.

We'd made it to our destination. Now it was time to get started.

Extra Chapter: Norn and the Millis Church

NORN GREYRAT was feeling uneasy, to put it lightly.

A month had passed since her brother Rudeus left to travel to the Begaritt Continent, and life in the city of Sharia was as peaceful as ever. It was very hard to believe that most of her family was in danger in some strange, far-off land.

Still, Norn's heart was troubled. There had been no word from Rudeus, of course. Not that she'd expected there to be. What was he going through right now? Was it her pestering that had driven him out there, to face dangers he was unprepared for?

If Rudeus died, Sylphie would be devastated. She'd weep and weep, holding a fatherless child in her arms.

Norn was just a child herself, and she might not be as sharp as her sister, but even she understood that Sylphie's brave smile was only an attempt to hide her real feelings. Deep down inside, Sylphie was suffering even now.

No matter how talented a magician Rudeus might be, there was still a possibility he'd die on his trip to the Begaritt Continent. And Norn had been the one who put him up to it.

If she hadn't pestered him... if she hadn't been so selfish...Rudeus and Sylphie would still be living together right now.

It was a painful thought. The anxiety and regret were enough to crush her.

Looking out the window of her dorm room, Norn heaved a long sigh. It was something she did regularly these days.

Outside, she spotted a few students walking in the direction of the school gates.

“Oh, right... I’m supposed to be going home today...”

Once every ten days, she was required to make an appearance at the Greyrat family house. Today was that tenth day.

Rising reluctantly to her feet, Norn started to get ready to leave.

As she walked toward the Greyrat home, her thoughts continued to dwell on the situation at hand.

The resentment or mistrust she’d felt towards Rudeus was mostly gone. She didn’t hate him the way she once had either. But that was part of what made this so scary. What if he didn’t come back home? What if a letter arrived, informing them of his death? She didn’t know if she could bear that now. She wouldn’t know how to apologize to Sylphie. There was Aisha, too...although she didn’t care about her quite as much.

Her mind was going in circles. This was a bad habit of Norn’s. Once she started worrying about something, it was very hard for her to stop.

“Hm?”

Noticing something out of the corner of her eye, Norn came to a stop.

She’d spotted a distinctive building standing at the end of a side street.

Back in the Holy Country of Millis, buildings like these were a very common sight. Every section of the city had one of its own. But since leaving that land behind, she'd seen very few of them.

"Is that a Millis church...? I didn't even know there was one in this city."

It wasn't built exactly like the churches in Millis, so it felt a bit odd to her. But its white color and basic design still made its function obvious.

"Come to think of it, I haven't said many prayers lately..."

Norn was a member of the Millis faith. Back in the Holy Country, when she was in the care of her mother's family, they'd brought her along to church on a regular basis. She'd learned the basics quickly enough—not something she'd consciously chosen to do herself, but she didn't feel like her family had forced her into it either. It was important to learn the church's teachings in Millis. Everyone expected you to know them and obey them.

Still, she wasn't exactly a passionate believer. After leaving Millis behind, she hadn't felt the need to wander around looking for churches to say her prayers in.

"..."

But today, Norn found herself turning down that side street.

The interior of the church was, in contrast to the street outside, rather tranquil. It certainly felt as if she'd stepped into a sacred space. The hush in the air, the imposing design of the building itself, the hint of warmth—it was all familiar to her.

The ceiling was a bit lower than those of the churches Norn remembered, but the orderly rows of benches were the same. And so was the sacred shrine in the rear.

Feeling a bit nostalgic, Norn made her way up to the holy symbol of Millis, kneeled down, and joined her hands together.

She hadn't prayed in years now, but her body still remembered how to do it.

"Great Saint Millis, hear my prayer... Please bring my brother home safely. And my father. And my mother. And Lilia, too..."

Norn felt a brief stab of worry that she might be asking too much by naming everyone individually like this. Saint Millis never interceded on behalf of the greedy. It was important to keep your wishes modest.

And yet, she decided only to rephrase her prayer.

"Please help everyone make it back safely."

If Millis saw fit to grant this plea, Norn's family would finally be whole again. They could finally live together, for the first time in many years. That was what Norn wanted more than anything.

In fact...at the moment, it was the *only* thing she really wanted.

If even that was asking too much, she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do.

"..."

By the time she finished with her prayers, Norn was feeling a bit better.

Maybe the atmosphere in this church was nice. Or maybe she'd managed to sort out her thoughts by putting them into words.

Either way, she found herself thinking, *I should come again.*

Norn attended her classes, did her exercises, and then headed to the church after school. This soon became her new routine.

When she prayed, she always felt a little better afterward. It felt like she was doing her part, somehow.

But then, one day, something gave way inside her.

“Please let everyone come back safe...”

When she murmured the same words she always did, a tear trickled from her eye. It ran slowly down her cheek before dropping off her chin. A second followed it, then a third; and all of a sudden, the dam had broken.

Norn knew, of course, that she was only consoling herself by coming here. Praying made her feel like she was doing something, but she wasn’t, really. There wasn’t anything she *could* do.

That was how things always had been, and it was how things would always be. She was powerless, and she knew it.

Sniffling, Norn covered her face, although there was no one here to hide it from.

She felt pathetic. Pathetic and frustrated. She hated how useless she was.

“Why are you crying?”

The voice seemed to come out of nowhere.

Startled, Norn looked up and around the church. She'd thought she was alone. There was a priest who ran this place, but he often wasn't around at this hour. That was why she usually had the place to herself.

But today, there was someone else here—a young man who had just emerged from the confession booth.

He looked about the same age as her brother Rudeus. His hair was long enough in front that she could only barely make out his eyes. Something the way he looked at her made her think he was the headstrong type.

"Wh-who are you?"

The young man frowned irritably at the question.
"What, you don't recognize me? I'm Cliff Grimor. I'm a novice at this church. Just started here this year."

For a mere novice, this young man seemed a little full of himself. But that arrogant tone helped spur Norn's memory. She'd met him once before. He was a friend of her brother's, and a somewhat notorious student at the University of Magic.

Now that she thought about it, she'd seen him at this church as well. When they said mass here, he was often hanging around helping out the priest.

"Oh...right, of course. Hello." Wiping away her tears, Norn bowed her head slightly.

Cliff snorted and strode closer to her. "Something bothering you, then? Go ahead, tell me all about it."

"Huh?"

"If something is making you miserable for no good reason, I'll deal with it for you. You have my word."

Norn was honestly just confused by this sudden offer. This man was her brother's friend, yes, but the two of them were basically speaking for the first time.

"Uh, but..."

"I think you may be aware, but the woman Rudeus is traveling with is my wife. I'm worried about her, of course, but I have faith in Rudeus' skills. I'm confident that he'll keep her safe. So for my part, I have an obligation to protect his family here in Sharia. If he risks his life for Lise, I'll do the same for you and your sister."

Now it made a bit more sense. Norn had known that Elinalise woman was once in her father's party, but not that she was married. It figured, though, considering how beautiful she was.

"I've noticed you coming in to pray every day from the confession booth. But this is the first time you broke down in tears, right?"

Norn had no way of knowing this, but Cliff tended to use these quiet afternoon hours to get a bit of studying done inside the confession booth while waiting for the rare visitor. Normally, he stayed in there unless he had some chore to take care of, but he'd revealed himself when he saw Norn crying.

"..."

"Go on, you can trust me. I'll take care of everything," said Cliff confidently, thumping a hand to his chest. "Is it an awkward problem? We can use the confession booth, if you like."

Norn was a little wary of the offer. In her experience, it was usually wisest not to trust anyone you were meeting for the first time.

But as she hesitated, she found herself remembering her brother—remembering the day he'd visited her in her dorm room. She remembered the look on his face. He'd been as anxious as she was.

Maybe Cliff, for all his big talk, was feeling the same things as her. His wife, Elinalise, had set off for the Begaritt Continent. He'd probably wanted to go along with her, but he hadn't been able to. Just like Norn.

In that case...maybe he *could* understand how she was feeling.

"Well, actually..."

And so, Norn opened up to Cliff.

At first, she explained, her brother had decided not to go to Begaritt. But then she'd pushed him to reconsider, and he'd eventually changed his mind.

There was a chance that Rudeus would die as a result. Sylphie would be heartbroken, of course. She loved Rudeus very much, and they were about to have a child and start their own family. If Sylphie lost him now, it would be a crushing blow. Norn knew how badly it would hurt.

And if this happened, it would all be her fault. Her brother wouldn't have gone off on this dangerous journey if she hadn't pressed the issue.

When she heard her father was in trouble, she'd been desperate to help. She'd wanted very badly for Rudeus to go save him. But at the time, it hadn't even occurred to her that he might not come home.

All she could do now was go to school, attend her lessons, and say a few prayers in the afternoon. But her prayers were just a way of comforting herself. She was powerless. There was nothing she could do to help.

The more she thought about that, the sadder it made her. That, Norn concluded, was why she'd started crying.

"What, is that all?" replied Cliff with a dismissive little snort.

"What do you mean, '*Is that all?*'"

Norn had expected Cliff to understand, so his words felt like a kind of betrayal.

But despite her sulky glare, Cliff snorted once again. "Listen. I'm not trying to brag, but I hail from Millis—"

"That's where I came from too."

"Let me finish, please. I'm the grandson of the Millis Pope. I was mixed up in a power struggle there, so my grandfather shipped me off to study here. In other words, I can't just go back home any time soon. No matter how much I want to help my family, I can't do a thing for them. I'm a lot like you, in other words."

"..."

"What do you think I should do about that?"

"Why are you asking me? I don't know..."

She didn't have an answer to that question. That was why she'd been crying. That was why she'd turned to him for advice.

"I see. Fortunately, I'm something of a genius, so I know the answer. Would you like to hear it? Hmm?"

"...Yeah. Please."

Cliff's tone was getting on Norn's nerves, but she did want to hear what he had to say.

"Very well then. First of all, think about the *reason* why I'm in this city. I was sent here because of the power struggle back home. Why? Because I'm too weak to defend

myself. I'm young, inexperienced, and have no real authority. It would have been very simple for them to abduct me and use me as a hostage. My grandfather's a sharp, ruthless man, but I'm a valuable part of his plans for the future. If his enemies kidnapped me, he would be forced to listen to their demands."

Norn could understand this. It wasn't so different from the reason she'd been left behind here. If she were as powerful as Rudeus, she might have been traveling with him right now, or even making her way through the Begaritt Continent on her own.

"Basically, if I want to avoid becoming a hostage, I need the strength to defend myself from violence."

"Strength? What do you mean?"

"I'm not talking about physical power. In my case, I'm focusing on studying, gathering as much information as I can, and learning new magic. Oh, and making friends counts too...especially if they have unusual skills or might rise into positions of power. When you've got strong allies on your side, it's harder for your enemies to hurt you."

This last point was something Cliff had only come to realize fairly recently, after falling in love with Elinalise and making friends with Rudeus. But there weren't many people out there who could tolerate his attitude, so he hadn't expanded his own social circle very much as of yet. Apart from Rudeus and Zanoba, there was *maybe* Nanahoshi, but that was about it.

"So you're training yourself, basically?" asked Norn.
"For what?"

"If I'm suddenly called back home to Millis one day, I want to bring new skills, new magic, and new connections with me. I'll make use of them to help my grandfather and

quickly secure myself a lofty position in the hierarchy of the church."

This was all just a fantasy at this point, of course. But Cliff believed in it earnestly. As long as he trusted in his abilities and worked to develop them, he was *sure* this future would come to pass.

"That's never going to happen, though," muttered Norn, staring down at the floor.

No one was going to call her to the Begaritt Continent any time soon. Even if they did, she wouldn't be of any use. If her brother and her father couldn't deal with the situation by themselves, she certainly wasn't going to be of any help.

"Oh, but it will. Not tomorrow, and not the day after tomorrow. But someday, there *will* come a day when our strength is put to the test. Perhaps it will be a year from now. Perhaps five, or even ten."

"..."

"Listen, Norn. There isn't much we can do, now that we've been left behind. If we tried to go and help, we'd only get in the way."

"I know that..."

"Good. This is the very reason why we need to use this time effectively. We need to focus on the few things we can do, and we need to grow stronger. This happens to be a teaching of the Millis Church, by the way."

Cliff reached into his robe and took out a small copy of the holy scriptures. He proceeded to recite a passage from memory, without even opening the book.

"Atomos Chapter 12, Verse 31. In these times of suffering, the righteous one endured. In these days of hardship, he cultivated his strength. When the weak of heart asked him why, the righteous one told them that the day

would surely come for him to strike with all his might. And when the wicked king of demons bore down on them with his great host, the righteous one swung down his holy sword upon him. That blade divided the mountains, the forests, and the seas, and it cleft the wicked king of demons in twain."

Norn remembered this verse as well. It was one she'd memorized several times at her old church—the story of Saint Millis bringing down his holy sword on the demon army. The power of that weapon was so great that it reached from Millishion to the Blue Wyrm Mountains, and then to the Great Forest, and then across the ocean. It struck the Demon King at the spot where Wind Port now stood, killing him instantly. The place where Millis launched this attack was now known as the Holy Sword Road.

"The stupendous might of Saint Millis is what most people remember about this passage, of course. But its true importance lies at the beginning. Even Millis himself was not omnipotent. He needed to bide his time and gather his strength before he could bring down the holy sword on his enemies. If you look to the history books, you'll read that the Millis army fought a great battle against the demons on the northern coast during this period. The human army's commander was Peter Dolior, said to be Saint Millis' closest friend, and he died in the fighting. Pained as he was by this loss, Millis kept his focus on the future."

"You mean he abandoned his friend? He left him to die?"

"No. Millis trusted his friend, and his friend trusted him. It was for that very reason that Peter fought to the death to slow the demons' advance, rather than retreating in defeat. And thanks to that sacrifice, their shared dream of victory and peace was realized."

With this emphatic lecture at an end, Cliff stared down into Norn's eyes.

"Now tell me, what is *your* dream?"

"I just want my family to be reunited. I want us to be happy again."

"Then do what you can to realize that goal. Study hard and learn your magic. It will be a great relief to your brother Rudeus and your father, wherever they might be."

"What am I supposed to do after that? After I've learned what I can, I mean?"

Cliff nodded, having expected this follow-up question. Turning to the shrine where the church's holy symbol was mounted, he paused for a moment and then answered.

"In the end, you pray. Saint Millis is always watching over us."

If Cliff had been speaking to Rudeus, the mage would have rolled his eyes at this. But Norn wasn't like her brother.

She was moved by these words. For the first time, she felt that the things she'd learned in church truly were meaningful.

Her teachers back in Millis had always told her to end every day with a prayer. It had seemed a bit arbitrary at the time—why not *begin* the day with a prayer?

But now she understood. There had been a reason for it after all.

"I think I understand. I'll focus on doing what I can for now."

"I'm very glad to hear that. If you run into any trouble or need help with your studies, feel free to seek me out. I'm usually here at this time of day, but you can also find me at my laboratory on campus."

"All right."

Norn left the church that evening in a newly buoyant frame of mind.

She had a goal now. She would follow the teachings of her faith and grow stronger in her brother's absence. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

“It’s kind of tricky to improve your relationship with a sibling,” said the author, generalizing somewhat.



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